

## Evaluation of Local Food Systems Based on De-growth

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### Abstract

*In this paper we argue that the purpose of local economic development formulated on the basis of de-growth differs from the conventional competitiveness-based approach significantly and meaningfully. Local food systems are often considered alternative local economic development initiatives and are prime candidates as means to the ends of local economic development based on de-growth. In this initial step of research we attempt to differentiate de-growth oriented local economic development from the conventional competitiveness oriented approach.*

**Key words:** local economic development, de-growth, local food system

**JEL Classification:** Q01, Q19, Q56, R11

### 1 Introduction

The aim of local economic development is\ to make the locals better off by deliberate interventions to the local economic processes. In the conventional competitiveness framework this means attaining relatively high employment rate and income per capita for a prolonged period of time, while the region is present in the global competition. In contrast, local economic development in the framework of de-growth aims to result in increased well-being without the constant growth of production and consumption, while respecting the differences of regions and living conditions of the locals.

Local food systems are means of a more ecologically sustainable and more socially equitable alternative local economic development. These are bottom-up initiatives of the local community built on trust, with the aim to provide locally produced food to the locals through a shortened and more transparent supply chain. We set out to answer the questions of *how might one outline local economic development on the bases of de-growth and how does local food systems fit into this framework as means to ends of local economic development.*

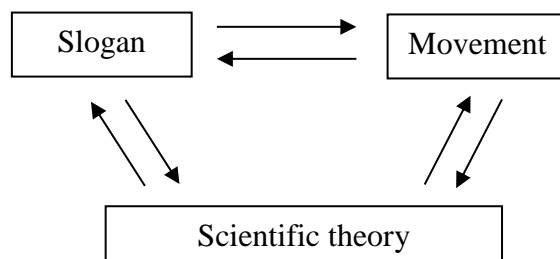
In this paper we look for connections between local economic development and de-growth literature. Then we describe local food systems as means to the ends of local economic development identified previously. Finally we attempt to formulate a framework for evaluating local food system initiatives on the bases of de-growth, which will be used in the next stage of our research.

## 2 About De-growth

The idea of de-growth appeared as an alternative reflective direction to find solutions for the problems and challenges caused by continuous economic growth like widening territorial and income differences, well-being problems, global environmental problems (ex. damaged ozone layer, climate change, and the overuse of other global common pool resources like rainforests and oceans) (Latouche 2011, Layard 2007, Málóvics and Bajmócy 2009, Meadows et al. 1972., Stiglitz 1997). Thus the aim of de-growth to help democratically and peacefully the transition into a more equitable society and liveable environment without extend the size of economy (Latouche 2011, Martinez-Alier et al. 2010).

The essence of de-growth is not supporting de-growth in the current system – as growth-oriented economies based on the institutions of capitalism are not capable of not growing because without economic growth they collapse and new problems emerge beside the aforementioned ones – but restructuring completely into a system where increased well-being can be achieved without the constant growth of production and consumption while the environmental impact significantly reduces (Gould et al. 2004, Kallis et al. 2012, Latouche 2011, Tokic 2012).<sup>1</sup> Thus de-growth is actually a kind of transformational sustainability theory which is very sensitive to social and environmental problems also (Hoopwood et al 2005).

The meaning of the expression of de-growth can be defined from three different aspects – slogan, social movement, scientific theory – but they cannot be sharply separated, since they constantly interact with each other (*Figure 1.*).



**Fig. 1. The relationships of the approaches of de-growth.**

Source: own construction

De-growth is a good example for “activist-led science” where the knowledge generated by the movements clarifies and strengthens in the academic literature (Demaria et al. pp 204.). The activist knowledge is generated by community groups through experience and covers different concepts like ecological debt and environmental justice. From time to time these concepts are taken and redefined by science. The opposite of this can also happen, that civil activism can start to use academic concepts. The steps for the implementation of de-growth can be grouped into four main categories, depending on which level of the society is affected: individual, community, national, supranational (Liegey et al 2013). This is the point where scientific theories and movements continuously interact with each other, so there is no strict boundary between the two aspects.

<sup>1</sup> Although there is a debate whether de-growth can be achieved within the frame of capitalism or not (Boillat et al. 2012, Bonaiuti 2012, Deriu 2012, Griethuysen 2012, Lawn 2011, Trainer 2012).

### 3 Local Economic Development in the Framework of De-growth

The classic definition of local economic development is conscious, community-based intervention into the local economic processes with the aim of creating more favourable situation as the previous one for local people (e.g. Bajmócy 2011). In de-growth literature – according to our knowledge – there is no exact, explicit definition for local economic development but we can find implicit concerns for it. If we take Bajmócy's (2011) definition we can create one for de-growth too: conscious, community-based intervention into the local economic processes with the aim of increasing well-being of locals without the constant growth of production and consumption, while respecting the environment and the differences of regions and living conditions of locals.

Local economic development can be a clue to start de-growth transition. Primarily on local level, small groups like residential communities, neighbourhoods' organizations, quarters, towns, cities, participants must develop new cohabitation forms at the local level, which can be models of production and consumption for other communities or state organizations (Liegey et al. 2013). Thinkers of de-growth strongly believe in bottom-up initiatives, so in the community level's means. It is important to rethink the redistribution and the recycling of goods organized from the bottom (Schneider 2008). It is worth to look back, learn from former societies – natural tribes, hunter-gatherer societies – in order to be able to respect more each other and the nature (Gowdy 2007). Innovative models of local life are needed which undertake the values of de-growth and with this rejecting the current capitalist culture (Kallis et al. 2012).

Social relationships are very important elements of de-growth strategies to increase well-being (Andreoni and Galmarini 2014). Thus de-growth suggests to strengthen reciprocity in the economy and partially complement market economy with it where the production and exchanges of goods and services aim to improve cooperation, conviviality and social relationships. Reciprocity can be explained as a combination of subsidiary production principle and the concept of conviviality. Subsidiary production aims to satisfy consumption needs nearest to the production place. So it is important to change from long distance trade to local distribution chains, decrease environmental impact generated by human activities, increase human health, make the product origin and quality traceable and improve trust between producer and consumer. Conviviality is defined as a kind of system of social relationships based on community support, social unpaid work, voluntary work, mutual aid, favour and community exchange, household and informal care work which aims to improve cooperation and social relationships. So reciprocity work is defined “as time devoted to society in the form of self-production, voluntary work or mutual exchange of goods and services” (Andreoni and Galmarini 2014, pp 79.).

According to Andreoni and Galmarini's (2014) model the combination of reciprocity and market work is able to increase the level of well-being and quality of life, have bigger effect on social capital generation and decrease the impact on natural capital depletion. The increase of social capital can be achieved by strengthening participation and democratic, collective control, and then a smaller size of economy can be controlled with it (Andreoni and Galmarini 2013). This re-democratization process will be able to improve communication between science, society and governance and increase cooperation.

The goal of community-controlled economic development is “a local economy that is vital, equitable, and secure, providing challenging work and empowering all community members”

(Campbell 2000. pp. 17). Deliberative and patient efforts are required to strengthen social capital within communities and among social organizations to achieve the goals.

#### **4 Local Food System as a Mean of De-growth Oriented Economic Development**

As de-growth considers healthy food as a part of well-being local food systems are important means to localize production and to move towards de-growth transition (Andreoni and Galmarini 2014, Liegey et al. 2013). In order to localize production the building of local supply systems should be encouraged in the community level (Liegey et al 2013). In order to follow Schumacher's (1973) value that "small is beautiful", self-sufficient organizations, small-scale agricultural production, attempts to new forms of co-existence, community gardens, and all new models of production, consumption and allocation should be supported that would serve the goals of de-growth.

Community-controlled economic development in agriculture "provides a conceptual umbrella under which pesticide reduction, labour, farmland protection, and related issues are components of a single organizing effort, rather than isolated issues, each with separate politics" (Campbell 2000. pp. 18.) Alternative, community supported agriculture "provides an alternative not only to production inputs and method but to the entire system of industrial farming" (Guthman 2004. pp.185). In the next sections we introduce what we call local food and local food system, and then we attempt to formulate a framework for evaluating these local food systems on the bases of de-growth.

#### **5 Defining Local Food and Local Food System**

The notion of local is quite complex. According to Knight (2013) the definition of local food has five main dimensions:

- *Geographical:*  
local food arrives within a certain distance which can be from 1 to 150 km.
- *Political:*  
local food arrives within a community, region, state or province, or country, so manufactured in a local government unit and sold in that same local government unit or adjacent government units only
- *Benefits and/or attributes:*  
local food is convenient, healthy, sustainable, can provide a status, and preserve open space.
- *Oppose to industrial or corporate agriculture:*  
locals organize alternative social movements.
- *Strengthen social relationships:*  
generally between consumers and producers, but among consumers and among producers also.

We can separate two main types of local food systems: indigenous peoples' food systems and food systems around urban cities. In traditional/indigenous peoples' food systems participants have access to food locally, „without having to purchase them, and within traditional knowledge and the natural environment from farming or wild harvesting”, but in some cases

they buy certain types of foods while they have right to maintain their cultures (Kuhnlein et al. 2009. pp. 3). Both types of food systems serve sustainability, food security, health and well-being, protect the ecosystem and cultures, and aim to decrease social inequalities, poverty and malnutrition (Kuhlein et al. 2009, Kuhnlein et al. 2013). In this paper we concentrate to food systems around urban cities where in order to find solutions for the main contemporary urban conflicts like social inequality and sustainability – previously mentioned – greater cooperation in the local level and interdisciplinary conversation are needed (Sevilla-Buitrago 2013).

All kinds of local food systems around urban cities aim to re-localize food production and consumption, and are committed to social, economic and environmental justice principles, although there can be some conceptual differences among the various kind of definitions (Feagan 2007):

- Alternative food networks “seek ways to reconnect food producers with consumers while articulating new forms of political association and market governance” (Hayden and Buck 2012. pp. 43.).
- Local food movements are “based on social and cultural interests, which includes support for local foods, farmers, economies and the environment through the production, processing, distribution and consumption of local foods” (Farmer 2012. pp. 490). The supporters of these movements are not only interested in food but in changing “our social fabric by strengthening rural and urban economies, revitalizing downtowns by increased patronage to the area, enhancing community and sense of place, as well as increasing food security and benefiting the environment through the production of agricultural products in a sustainable manner on lands that currently support a monoculture of commodity crops” (Farmer 2012. pp. 491).
- The Oklahoma Food Policy Council (2003, pp. 3) defines local food system as “a system where there are adequate opportunities and infrastructure for food producers to sell their goods to local people and institutions”.
- Feenstra (2002, pp. 100) defines community food system as “a collaborative effort to build more locally based, self-reliant food economies – one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption is integrated to enhance the economic, environmental and social health of a particular place”.
- Rights-based food systems „are democratic participation in food system choices affecting more than one sector; fair, transparent access by producers to all necessary resources for food production and marketing; multiple independent buyers; absence of human exploitation; absence of resource exploitation; and no impingement on the ability of people in other locales to meet this set of criteria” which can be achieved by “facilitating food democracy and reducing environmental exploitation, primarily by lowering environmental costs due to long-distance transportation” (Anderson 2008, pp. 593).

These alternative food initiatives, movements can have various forms: alternative agro-food networks and systems, community food security, civic and democratic agriculture, postproductivism, alternative or shortened food chains, community gardens, Slow Food movements, the ‘quality turn’ and the variety of other permutations (Feagan 2007).

## 6 Evaluating Local Food Systems on the Basis of De-growth

First of all in order, to evaluate local food systems on the basis of de-growth it is important to make difference between those systems which would like to grow, scale up and export local foods out of the given location, region or would like to attract tourists, and those ones which would like to serve the locals only. The second one is that type which can serve the values of de-growth. There are five main aspects of an evaluation framework of local food systems:

- the consumers' side,
- the community's/society's side,
- the producers'/farmers' side,
- the environment's side,
- the transformative power of the system.

On the consumers' side it is important if they are aware of that specific local food system which operates nearest to their cities, and if they have enough motivation to buy local foods (Knight 2013). Awareness, knowledge and understanding about local foods can be increased by effective campaigns, events and logo too. It is also important to recognize the barriers why consumers do not buy local foods such as availability, price or location. Willingness to pay for local foods is increasing as the travelled distance is decreasing – but it depends on how perishable the product is –, and as perceptions of freshness, taste, food safety and the support of local economy and environmental impacts are increasing (Grebitus et al. 2013). For consumers it is also determining that dealing with local foods can be a form of leisure time through an adopted food-style, recipe-sharing, shopping local foods, cooking, and eating them, and this kind of behaviour as a recreational experience (Farmer 2012). Another indicator can be if people eat healthier, more securely and thanks to it they have a better quality of life. As a productive consumer the purchase practice of restaurants and school's canteens should be examined also (Oklahoma Food Policy Council 2003, Sharma et al. 2014).

From the community's side the most significant if the participation in the decision-making, democratic control, subsidiarity, deliberative, ways and reciprocity works, social capital and social relationships strengthen, and whether the relationships are more direct between farmers and consumers, and food equity and local well-being is supported (Bajmócy and Gébert 2014, Feagan 2007, Feenstra 2002, Francis 2009). It is also important if non-profit organization and the central and/or local governments support the initiatives and agriculture policies promote local food production, processing and consumption (Feenstra 2002).

Many small-scale farms face difficulties in getting their products into the transnational distribution channels (Martikainen et al. in press). Local food system with their close cooperation spirit can help producer to solve their logistical problems and can create a stable base for family farms (Feenstra 2002). In order to be effective these farms have to acknowledge some service expectations from modern, urban citizens. They need to increase customer-orientation, improve reliability and cost-efficiency of the deliveries, and understand better the customers' needs and the value creation. Another evaluation viewpoint is if farmers are engaged very much to their activity, it can be the pursuit of their leisure time, work and hobby together which need special skills, knowledge, and experience, so then it improves their working and living conditions (Farmer 2012, Feenstra 2002).

From the side of the environment one of the most critical aspect whether local food systems have lower greenhouse gas emission and energy consumption than multinational distributional systems or not, but the results are not univocal (Coley et al. 2009, Mundler and

Rumpus 2012). Sustainable agriculture and local food systems preserve crop biodiversity, environmental biodiversity; have sustainable energy, water and other natural resource use, and use agro-ecological methods (Duram and Oberholtzer 2010, Goland and Bauer 2004).

The last, comprehensive evaluation aspect concerns on the transformative power of local food systems, so which parts of the society are affected. Are local food systems able to address all kind of groups of society – from people with the lowest income to people with the highest income – in order to bring real transformation, or is it only a small elite who enjoys the benefits.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper we looked at the literature of de-growth and local food systems with the purpose of reframing local economic development from the viewpoint of de-growth on the one hand. We find this necessary because while mainstream local economic development received extensive critique from ecological economists on the bases of sustainability, and from social scientists and moral philosophers on the bases of its moral instrumentalism and narrow information bases, an interpretation of local economic development with the specific foundation in de-growth has not yet been carried out.

On the other hand we attempted to formulate an analytical framework for evaluating the possible role of local food systems in said de-growth oriented local economic development agenda. In this attempt we found that different spheres of stakeholders should be taken into account including the consumers, the community, the producer and the environment. Another key aspect, that holds great potential for local economic development is the transformative power of these initiatives. In this sense local food systems can contribute to the democratization of the production and distribution system. In the future we would like to build on this framework and use qualitative methods to investigate the role that local food systems play in a specific Hungarian local economy.

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