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Strengthening Alternative Agro-food Networks in the Eastern European Countryside

Abstract

This paper will answer the question raised by the ongoing debate on the conditions of Alternative Agro-Food Networks (AAFN) strengthened in the specific context of different European countries. Modern, sustainable local food systems are built on the basis of social networks which linked different actors into a coherent, horizontal web. Producers, processors and consumers are bonded by a common vision and values which go far beyond simple market production. The issue of sustainable food production and consumption gains special importance in the post-transformation countries of Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Alternative Agro-Food Networks, relocalization, agriculture, sustainable rural development

During the last few years there has been a noticeable increase, within the field of rural sociology, of the study of agriculture's role in the cultural and social landscape of the countryside. The question of whether food production systems or, in a wider sense, forms of agriculture are compatible with the concept of sustainable development of rural areas has recently fuelled an on-going debate (Rastoin 2009: 12). On the one hand, it is difficult not to observe certain attempts which aim at embedding non-economic concepts of agricultural development. On the other, specification, intensification, spatial homogenisation and pressure for modernisation all indicate the rather stable character of agricultural production on a global scale (Buttel 2006: 217). Social sciences and the geographical concepts of the qualitative departure as well as Alternative Agro-Food Networks proposed by David Goodman can serve as an attempt to answer the above-raised question about the problem concerning the interdependence of the ideas on the rural areas development

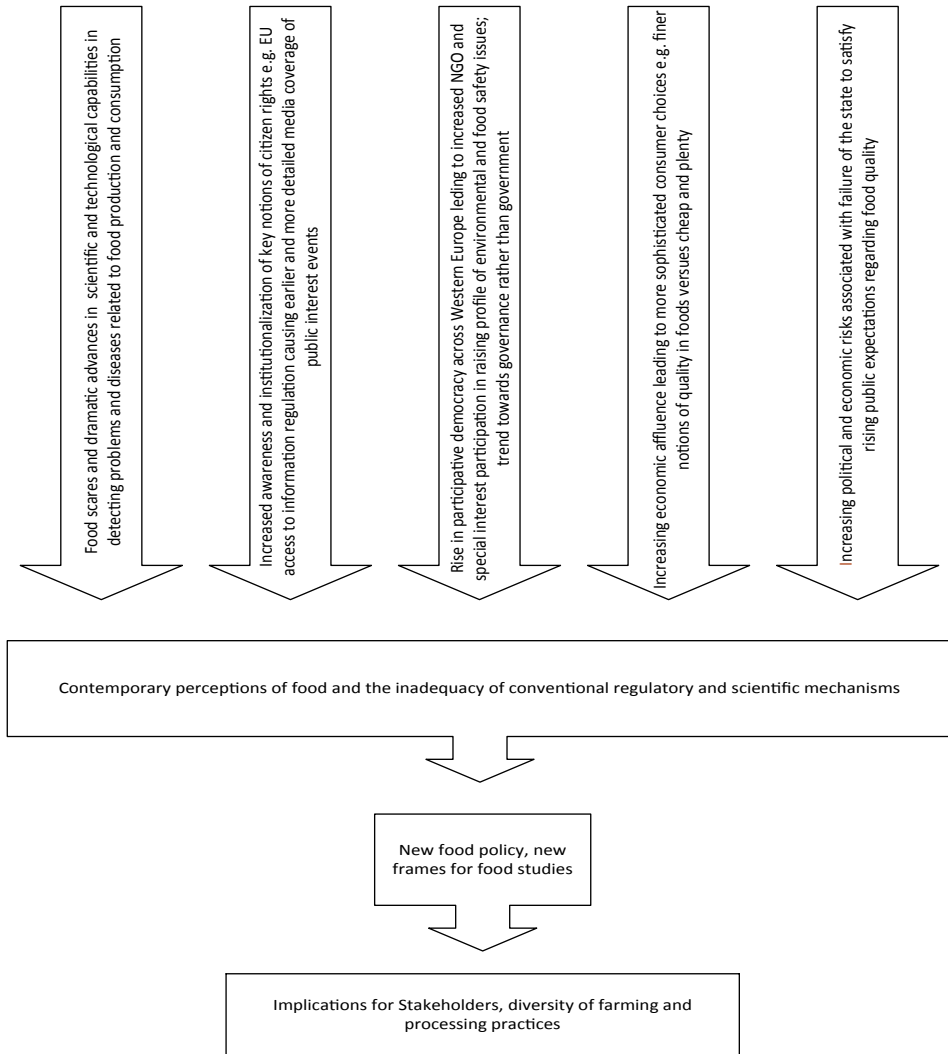
(Goodman 2004). To put it simply, all of them raise a question about the place of alternative forms of production and food consumption in the policy of development as well as improving the chances of rural areas. Moreover, they try to unite and grasp the change of stress transferred, to a certain degree, to the analysis of such phenomena as ecological and traditional agriculture, short food chains, alternations of methods of consumption, local food processing, non-economic functions of agricultural production (Higgins, Dibden, Cocklin 2008: 15).

In this article, we will attempt to transfer the idea of Alternative Agro-Food Networks into the realities of Eastern Europe, putting an emphasis on how the socio-cultural uniqueness of the region determines the chances and directions of alternative Agro-Food Networks. This article presents the results of research conducted within the Facilitating Alternative Agro-Food Networks: Stakeholder Perspective project that was carried out as part of the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community. Unfortunately, territorial limitations, as well as the preliminary and exploratory character of the research mean that the conclusions presented in this article can only be treated as a contribution to the discussion. Therefore, the outcomes fail to answer exhaustively all the questions concerning AAFN in the described region. This paper is based on a speech delivered by Wojciech Goszczyński at the IX European Sociological Association Conference in Lisbon.

Before starting to elaborate on the results of the research, we will try to outline briefly the reasons why the social sciences show an interest in AAFN. Furthermore, we will make an attempt to evaluate the usefulness of the term in the context of development relating to the countries' rural areas which have undergone structural transformation. Certainly, any attempt at defining both the place and role of agriculture is strongly connected with the departure from its industrial vision, as well as emphasizing the growing or recurrent trends in Europe that aim at relocalising the production and food processing (Sonnino, Marsden 2006: 181). One of the most significant reasons for the occurrence of such a change are *food scares*, constant reports on food problems, dioxin scandals or BSE. All those factors increase consumer pressure on improving the quality and safety of agricultural production (Goodman 2004: 5).

That phenomenon has overlapped with a range of other processes, such as the change in priorities within the Common Agricultural Policy, the increase in the interest of non-profit organisations connected with agriculture, and finally, the growing democratisation of local communities. All these elements contribute to the fact that European agriculture started insisting on the

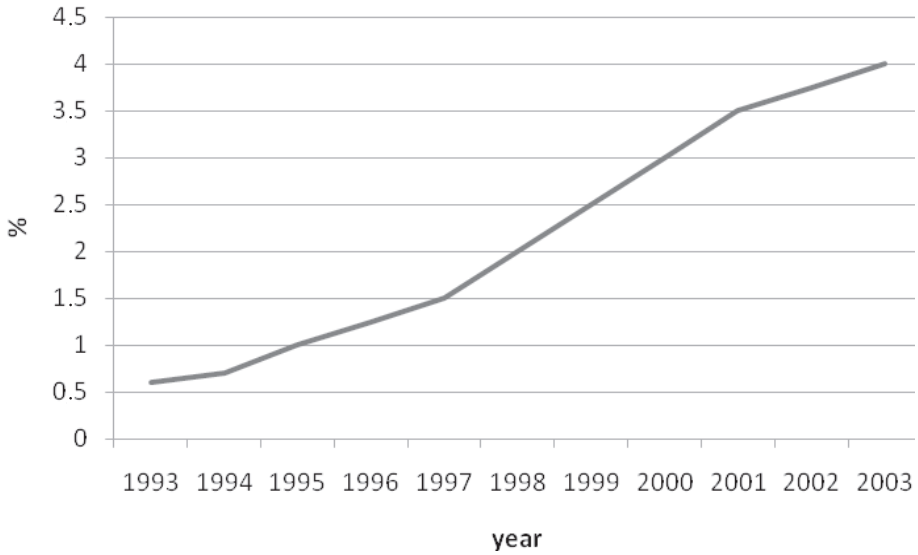
Figure 1. Factors contributing to perceptions of food, new regulatory and scientific approaches



Source: (Marsden 2006: 7, modified)

improvement of both the quality and safety of food. Among the initiators are the following institutions: consumer groups, educational institutions responsible for the diagnosis of hazards, as well as political institutions that implement new quality control mechanisms (Marsden 2006: 7).

Figure 2. Growth in area of organic farming in EU



Source: data's of DG agriculture

It seems that the issues regarding the connection between environmental protection and the rise in quality and safety become more and more important elements in the process of shaping the future agricultural production in the European Union. Suffice it to say, the two elements are to play a crucial role and become the reference points for the development mechanisms in the Common Agricultural Policy reform, the implementation of which is bound to take place after 2013. Meanwhile, the question still remains whether the change of production priorities corresponds with the change of the paradigm concerning the development of rural areas; and to what extent agriculture will become an inherent part of concepts referring to rural area development? There are two major approaches that dominate in this field. The first one implies that the change will result in the relocalisation of agriculture and the restoration of the socio-cultural space of the countryside (van Der Ploeg, Renting 2004). The representatives of the latter assume that the change will be comparatively irrelevant and that it will finally come down to the creation of an exclusive niche (Goodman 2004). Without going into the details of these contrary arguments, it should be taken into account that there exists a real risk of

limiting agricultural reform to its technical aspects. The methods of ecological production serve as the best examples. One of the processes that seems most interesting and worth analysing is the ongoing industrialisation of this sector. On the one hand, we arrive at the idea of biodynamic agriculture which stemmed from non-economic needs for the diversification of agriculture. On the other, the processes of institutionalisation, as well as industrialisation of agriculture become particularly visible (Guthman 2004: 301). Therefore, this type of activity meets safety requirements and product quality. However, it does not bring anything particularly new to the cultural and social structure of the countryside. In other words, the conventionalisation of alternative forms of agriculture affects the economic capital, yet it does not influence its socio-cultural forms (Van Der Ploeg, Renting 2004: 238).

The basic question is: how should agriculture be shaped in order to preserve or renew interactions and the positive impact, which farmers had on communities, space and rural nature? Is it possible to reverse the global trends that aim at the partial localisation of agriculture? The concept of Alternative Agro-Food Networks provides us with an answer to this question.

A fundamental issue is the local embeddedness of Alternative Agri-Food Networks. As Krzysztof Gorlach notices, 'Localness consists in the protection of the local uniqueness concerning both natural and cultural environments, supporting this local uniqueness, as well as protecting the place in the global village' (Gorlach 2004: 235). As such, not only is it a process concerning the pursuit of a new value added in the agricultural production, but also (if not above all) a way of appealing to the wider needs and problems which are articulated by environments which either have something to do with agriculture, or not in the context of various global threats. They include a rural renewal movement, consumer movements, ecological organisations, the fair trade movements. The local embeddedness of AAFN, as Terry Marsden states (Marsden 2006), is above all, an attempt at relocation of the production, food processing and distribution which takes into account postulates of a more just and fair division of profit in the global food and agricultural chain. What is mainly meant here are small and medium agricultural households the position of which in relation to multinational corporations is burdened beforehand with a gross disproportion in the share of products offered to consumers. Relocalisation and, in its context, the role of the local AAFN embeddedness cannot be merely reduced to the benefits that the agricultural producers gain. The key issue is to create conditions which would enable to keep the majority

of profits generated from both food processing and the sales of agricultural and food products, or even all of them, within the local community where the goods are produced. To give an example, the research carried out in the Lower Vistula Valley reveals that jam produced by local farmers is not only packed and labelled there, but also on sale in the local convenience shops. In such a situation the potential market success of AAFN is, in fact, the success of the whole community.

If one assumes that the underlying cause of market success concerning this kind of initiative is to gain consumer trust and loyalty, it becomes clear that these networks are subjected to social control by local communities. This control consists in, as Goszczyński and Knieć's research shows (Goszczyński, Knieć 2011), accepting by country dwellers, who live in particular villages or groups of villages, their community of interests in the process of realisation of the undertaking which relates to the created network. In the initiative which was studied in the Lower Vistula Valley, the local community subjected certain agricultural households to informal stigmatisation as they had introduced too far-reaching modifications in the recipes concerning locally produced plum jam. The modifications were aimed at generating profit. In another case, the local community detected and stigmatised, through informal information channels – gossip, the cases in which the plums used for jam production had nothing in common with the local plum varieties; however, the jam was sold directly in an agricultural household. The local embeddedness also gives a chance for creating an image of the offered goods which is based on a specific and unique taste of unprocessed agricultural products, as well as an authentic recipe of the processed ones. In an era of rapid decrease in consumer trust towards mass-produced and processed goods together with the growing exhaustion concerning culinary universalisation (Goodman 2004: 5) the local embeddedness constitutes a key element in the AAFN marketing strategies. One of the basic assumptions consists of agricultural regionalisation, meeting safety and quality requirements which all together ought to proceed with a simultaneous consideration of changes taking place at the level of local communities. The purpose is to integrate the agricultural production issues with rural sustainable development by uniting or rather connecting, such groups as: farmers, local communities, manufacturers, consumers, etc. (Goodman 2002: 271).

The introduction of Alternative Agro-Food Networks reverses the prospect of approaching alternative forms of agriculture by putting the emphasis on their integrated character which also refers to the rural areas

development. In other words, the change concerning this particular form of agricultural production is not only connected with the external influence, but also stems from the changes taking place in rural areas. Before trying to define the concept, it is important to focus on the reasons for the growing interest in alternative methods of agriculture. Originally, they were supposed to serve as an alternative to a network of agricultural product sales, and create an opposition to the supremacy of supermarket chains and those located far away from consumers. Another interpretation stresses the willingness of sustaining and popularising the technique of production which guarantees product quality, by identifying the above-mentioned chains with ecological or traditional agriculture. It seems, however, that the above-presented concepts do not answer the question thoroughly enough.

Firstly, there is the issue concerning the questionable possibility of reaching an exhaustive definition of AAFN and determining their nature, which is dependent on the socio-cultural context. Preliminary studies indicate that in Europe we deal with two basic concepts of the term. The first tradition, which dominates in Great Britain and the Netherlands, places the emphasis on the necessity of improving standards of hygiene as well as a grassroots approach which should be understood as society's ability to get organised around issues concerning agriculture and food production (Fonte 2008: 201). Clear signs of an alternative and local production, which should be approached in the above-mentioned way, are informal groups that have been growing in number and whose aim is to reconstruct ties with agriculture and rural areas, as well as an access to healthy food. Green markets serve as a perfect example – community supported agriculture, box schemes. It must be added that these are typical examples of countries where the tradition of local agriculture has practically vanished and where industrial agriculture prevails. The second model is based on a deeply rooted tradition, attachment to the region and the practices of pre-industrial agriculture. This approach is typical of countries (the Mediterranean Basin) which have never fully finished the changes connected with the Industrial Revolution. In this perspective, localness refers to the attempts at bringing back the meaning and value to the traditional techniques and products (Fonte 2008: 202). What seems particularly indispensable in determining the role of AAFN is the question concerning the localisation of agriculture. Any reference to an area, its tradition or values becomes a key issue in shaping the framework of the definition. Furthermore, a considerable potential of AAFN is hidden in this postulate. This fact allows the enrolment of agriculture on rural development programmes. Moreover, AAFN distinguishes

alternative agricultural networks from ecological agriculture and excessive industrialisation of the initiative. Any reference to an area, irrespective of the adopted model, becomes a crucial element that facilitates the identification of AAFN and reinforces cohesion of the network itself through locating it in a geographical or cultural region. The above illustration, no matter how one-sided and clear the judgement is, shows, however, the existence of the basic differences between the conventional and located approach to agriculture in rural areas. The latter model seems to match the idea of an anti-modernising and anti-global movement and, therefore, tries to construct and express the local identity as well as the culture of rural areas (Gorlach 2004: 235).

Another problem that should be considered is the meaning of the term “alternative”. It is important to determine whether this notion stands for production methods, consumer attitudes or the system of distribution. It seems to be vital because of the analysis of the phenomenon itself, as well as when designing the political mechanisms of development. It must be noticed that while realising the project, agreeing on one European definition concerning alternative forms of development turned out to be futile. It seems that the definition depends on the context, economic situation, cultural tradition and the social cohesion of a given state. Naturally, such situations cannot be considered satisfactory. A considerable increase in the interest in AAFN leads to a need for a common framework which would help understand and describe the phenomenon. Certainly, AAFN can be described through their oppositional attitude towards the global agro-industrial complex (Buttel 2006: 218). This oppositional quality does not only refer to the economic and production dimension. The quality is based on a reconstruction of the network of social connections with agriculture, cultural reinterpretation of agricultural production, as well as production methods. Nevertheless, the elements themselves are insufficient in order to talk about a new creation that would join agricultural development and rural areas. What proves that, is the previously argued example concerning the conventionalisation of organic agriculture. This phenomenon matches the industrial logic of development as a result of meeting the requirements concerning alternativeness (Guthnam 2002).

Meanwhile, AAFN emerge somewhere at the junction of alternativeness and localness. In theory, they possess a potential for changing the customers’ attitudes towards food as well as the countryside. Moreover, AAFN influence both social and cultural capital of the inhabitants who live in rural areas. These correlations are shown on the graph below:

Figure 3. Correlations between form of agricultural production and notion of alternativeness and locality

		Locality	
		Low	High
Alternativeness	High	Organic agriculture	Alternative Agro-Food Networks
	Low	Industrial agriculture	Regional agriculture (small- scale but industrial)

Therefore, a new place for a new creation emerges in agriculture and rural areas. The networks, which sustain the social, cultural and economic functions of agriculture and connect them with society, find their place within those movements that aim at emphasising the role of localness in development.

The time has come for defining AAFN, while stressing that it is only the first attempt and, therefore, far from being perfect. For the sake of research, which is the basis for this article, AAFN are defined as networks connecting farmers, manufacturers, non-profit organisations, sellers and consumers joined through the process of production, food processing, distribution and consumption of food. The networks must have the following characteristics:

- **Regional embeddedness:** production connected with a geographically coherent area.
- **Cultural embeddedness:** production connected with traditional, cultural or regional uniqueness.
- **Social embeddedness:** a network clearly connects all stakeholders; producers, manufacturers and consumers. Products are no longer only perceived as food, but as tools for identity construction and improving the social coherence of the stakeholders.
- **High quality:** Production is focused on the process of increasing the value through improving product quality, not quantity.
- **Distribution through short food chains:** direct sales, specialist shops or chains of shops, green markets, contracting, regional baskets, etc. Sales should not go beyond the region.

- **Non-economic motivations:** a network is not only for profit. Part of the work consists of promoting values of a non-economic character, such as a healthy lifestyle, protecting agricultural tradition and integrating local communities.

To sum up, AAFN do not only come down to networks of distribution or high quality. Such networks must connect both rural residents and consumers. Moreover, such a network should reinforce, or at least, make use of the region's culture, as well as be based on a geographically coherent area. It seems though, that despite the changes, it is possible to establish general frameworks limiting the definitions of alternative networks. We are convinced that the most important element responsible for the shaping of AAFN is the involvement of social, cultural and natural capital in the process of agricultural production (van der Ploeg 2006: 268).

The characteristic of rural areas after the transformation from the perspective of constructing AAFN

One of the most important aspects characteristic of rural areas in the countries that have undergone structural transformation is the low level of social capital, particularly in its bridging and linking forms.

International comparative research, such as *World Values Survey*, provides us with very general data regarding social capital. This quantitative research conducted on two representative samples was carried out twice: in 1990 and in 1995. The advantage of such a procedure consists in the possibility of tracing the

Table 1. Index of social trust (Reiser, Heapfer, Nowotny, Wallace 2001: 6)

Country	1990	1995
Belarus	25.5	24.1
Bulgaria	30.4	28.6
Czech Republic	30.2	28.5
Hungary	24.6	22.7
Lithuania	30.8	21.9
Poland	34.5	17.9
Romania	16.1	18.7
average in OECD	44.5	43.0

Source: (Reiser, Heapfer, Nowotny, Wallace 2001: 6)

dynamics of change (Reiser, Heapfer, Nowotny, Wallace 2001: 7). The first clue concerning the level of social capital gives us the measurement of generalised trust. The object of the analysis is, in that case, an index which consists of variables regarding norms of trust and reciprocity that come from the state, community members, as well as the attitude towards altruism, volunteering, faith in the effectiveness of one's actions and institutions.

It is clear that post-communist countries show less generalised trust. A visible limitation concerning social circles in comparison with the developed countries is another unfavourable aspect.

Table 2. Relationship inside social circles, in%

% of declared strong relationship with:				
	family		Friends	
	high	low	high	low
Belarus	80.48	13.30	31.73	56.50
Bulgaria	88.53	10.24	31.73	50.75
Czech Republic	91.08	7.26	38.65	50.83
Hungary	89.52	8.17	38.33	37.87
Lithuania	73.97	23.22	21.89	56.02
Poland	90.16	9.50	26.11	58.49
Romania	88.83	8.90	20.76	47.45
average for post-transition countries	86.04	11.91	35.35	50.17
average for OECD	85.99	12.12	56.79	38.69

Source: (Reiser, Heapfer, Nowotny, Wallace 2001: 10)

In these circumstances the situation of the Eastern European countryside becomes particularly specific. The following factors: history, social stratification and socialist modernisation led to the emergence of the “social void” – a specific phenomenon which consists of diminishing of citizens' identification and identity to the level of family and state institutions. To put it simply, the situation comes down to a general inability to co-operate at the level of informal associations or organisations. This results in setting limits for control with the use of civil society. From the perspective of AAFN this fact implies the limitation of social support, precisely, the basis enabling the performance of innovative and risky activities in rural areas. Stakeholders acting within those networks are largely forced to function on their own. It seems that it is not the quality or safety of the production that are the key elements of AAFN.

These aspects are also typical of industrialised forms of organic agriculture. However, it is crucial to construct or rather increase the number of social networks embracing different stakeholders that are connected with the rural areas through food production or consumption.

At this point, it is time to raise a question: What are the effects of the embedded inability for stakeholders to cooperate in a network of agricultural production?

The research results conducted within the FAAN project indicate that in the case of the countries which have undergone the process of structural and social transformation, the effectiveness of grassroots activities, which aim at creating a support network of alternative products, is relatively limited. The initiation of networking activities is impeded. Moreover, the social base that could support AAFN also leaves a lot to be desired. The character of both social history and the state's structures (the example of Poland) leads to the decrease in the effectiveness of activities based on a communitarian vision of civil society. Therefore, while constructing or supporting AAFN in countries of an unconsolidated tradition of co-operation, an additional emphasis should be put on shaping skills concerning co-operation among stakeholders. It is social capital in its synergy and filled with a network of institutional connections that seems to be the key to the skilful management of AAFN.

Another aspect affecting the shape of AAFN and directly connected with the level and assessment of social capital is the role of the public sector. The research, the outcome of which constitutes the basis for this article, indicates supremacy or rather colonisation of the grassroots initiatives in rural areas performed by stakeholders that are connected with state institutions. Naturally, this can be due to the weakness of a society which is unable to control the processes of change. In such a situation, activities or initiatives based on the assumption about multi-governance become vulnerable to an acquisition by a stakeholder, especially when he/she has the greatest potential of goods or power. The example of AAFN colonisation is the case of The Culinary Heritage Network of Warmia, Masuria and Powiśle. At a first glance it seemed a perfect alternative model, however, a mature and already formalised union of small and local producers, food processing workers and distributors offer products based on the traditional varieties of plants and animals, as well as recipes, prescriptions and packaging. An important advantage was a package offer of local and traditional food products with agritourism services which allowed the use of local potential for the sake of various interest groups even more effectively. The network currently embraces fifty producers and food

processing workers of agricultural products, four local shops and twenty nine tourist farms and boarding houses. Nevertheless, attention ought to be drawn to the fact that the initiative concerning the creation of it, stemmed from the voivodship government which defined the formal frames of its operations. It is beyond doubt that without the initiative from the local authorities, the network would not have been created, especially when taking into account the low amount of social capital at local level. The basic obstacle emerged as a result of pressure imposed by the regional authorities. The network started embracing new companies processing agricultural goods on a mass scale in the region, which contributed to the dissatisfaction of local producers and food processing workers. For these companies the possibility to label their own brands with the Network logo became an opportunity to exploit the slow-food fashion and local products. However, according to the producers, manufacturers and contractors who are the Network's members, it has decreased both the brand's and the Network's credibility through blurring the identity of the local, traditional products and services on offer which until then were based on a full recognition of both the producer and the food processors.

In the case of post-communist countries, primary functions in AAFN are performed by public sector institutions, beginning from local governments and ending with the bodies responsible for hygiene regulations. The institutions have the potential to initiate and control the process of social and economic changes, as they have the right to act, possess financial and human reserves, as well as law mechanisms. The role of public institutions should not be perceived according to the binary opposition principle. Undoubtedly, however, it plays a crucial role. It is difficult to imagine how Polish farmers function without taking into consideration the influence of such bodies as regional government or the Agricultural Advisory Centre. On the one hand, these are the only institutions supporting farmers and manufacturers, on the other, the bureaucratic logic of such institutions leaves its mark. It is important not to omit the role of organisations responsible for the implementation of European regulations, particularly hygiene regulations. The situation in which regulations are strictly followed can cause a decrease in effectiveness of AAFN, or can even lead to typical industrial production. What seems vital in this context, are the differences concerning the degree of obedience and restrictiveness of those rules in different EU countries. It is possible that sociology can come up with a solution to this problem of an only seemingly technical nature. In a situation when socially accepted methods of

quality control and safety are lacking, there is a space filled with law. That happens irrespective of society and thanks to that fact, society functions even in circumstances in which social ties hardly exist.

As we can see, it is problematic in the studied case to achieve the postulate of social coherence when trying to construct alternative networks connecting residents of rural areas. It is particularly difficult when considering an unfavourable institutional and legal background. Unfortunately, a postulate of AAFN regional embeddedness also seems difficult to realize. Traditionally, the local identity of rural communities was regarded as unfavourable to the proper development of Eastern Europe for almost fifty years. The blind application of the modernisation paradigm led to a considerable unification of rural areas, their communities, culture and environment. The situation has been reinforced by demographic processes, growing urbanist pressure and industrialisation, as well as the de-individualisation of agriculture. As a result, the geographical, social and cultural identity of regions, which constitutes the base for rural communities, has been disturbed. Owing to that fact, the fulfilment of the regional and cultural imperative has become harder. To conclude, it is more difficult for inhabitants of rural areas to identify with their place of residence, environment and tradition. An important aspect constituting the AAFN chances is taking into account tacit and local systems of knowledge. Meanwhile, at least some of the results of the AAFN project indicate a disorder of such cognitive structures. Both local and regional identities are of an eclectic and egalitarian character consisting of different elements. It is difficult for a farmer, producer, manufacturer or consumer to operate according to the normative system and values. The situation gets even more interesting when one realises that on the declarative level the very aspects constituted the base for our respondents' activities. The in-depth analysis revealed how fragile the base was.

To sum up, by the expression “unsustainable environment of the development of Alternative Agro-Food Networks” we understand a lack or deficiency in the structures of civil society; the role of the public sector, a lack of legal regulations, especially Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) and the disturbed cultural and geographical continuity of rural communities. It has to be stressed that the last element affects both consumers and other links in the chain. A lack of coherence makes the process of identification with rural areas, the cultural and natural environment and with the product itself extremely difficult.

Towards the new model of AAFN

Every attempt to answer the question that was raised at the beginning of this article confirms that the AAFN theory should be equipped with an additional model taking into account the uniqueness of Eastern Europe. Despite certain similarities, the social, cultural and institutional character of rural areas in this part of Europe is unique to such an extent that it requires different solutions concerning the development of Alternative Agro-Food Networks. The idea of alternative production, which puts the emphasis on the quality and safety of production, as well as fair trade also takes into consideration such factors as social aspects, localisation of agriculture, bottom-up management of the rural environment. Owing to that fact, it becomes particularly significant to conceptualise the model, which would suit the character of the rural areas after structural transformation. In the described case, it is necessary to emphasise the support of local communities and their abilities to act. It is even more difficult, but equally important, to work out informal and non-institutionalised standards of co-operation in production, food processing and sales. One should also bear in mind the importance of creating and sustaining connections between rural communities and consumers. AAFN are among the few initiatives allowing different groups to join in the process of the sustainable development of rural areas. Making an attempt to work out the model of co-operation within the Alternative Agro-Food Systems of production is the key to success. Doing so would help minimise the danger stemming from the unsustainable character of the social background in which AAFN happen to function in Eastern Europe.

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