

Amplification processes of Food Retailer Cooperatives for food system transformation

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Conventional production and consumption practices are not sustainable. Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) propose alternative practices driven by ecological and cooperative principles, thus promoting common good beyond profit maximisation. Their goal is to connect producer and consumers more directly, engaging participants that share their values and needs. One scarcely studied AFN are Food Retailer Cooperatives (FRCs). These are models of food retailer developed by a community of either producers (producer cooperatives) or consumers (consumers cooperatives). In the case of producer cooperatives, the retailer allows to direct-sell to consumers, and in the case of consumers cooperatives, the retailer allows consumers to collectively participate in their food provision. Strengthening these alternatives and amplifying their practices could accelerate a transformation towards sustainable food systems. To explore this possibility, the following research question is address: *How FRCs engage new consumers to amplify sustainable practices and transform food systems?*

To answer it, empirical research on FRCs using as case study the region of Baden-Württemberg (BW), was conducted. First, the existing FRCs were identified, cross-checked and mapped. The research involved ongoing FRCs only. The data was collected through an online study that included 73 homepages of FRCs, homepages of mentioned stakeholders, online newspaper articles and social media. A survey was also conducted to gather further insights from participants and support a sampling for in-depth interviews. 31 surveys were answered and six face-to-face interviews were conducted following the purposive strategy of diversity of models and longer experience among participants. The data was then analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis. Theoretical frameworks for system transformation, AFN characterisation, and amplification processes were used to structure data.

80 FRCs were observed in BW, operating through one of four main models identified. These models were: member store, food-coops, town-store cooperative, which can be classified as consumer cooperatives, and Raiffeisen markets, which are producer cooperatives. High diversity of problem addressed, visions and practices could be observed across FRC models in relation to alternative foods, networks and economic model, showing hybridization of conventional and alternative practices, and tensions between the business, and sustainable transformation. The relationship between producers and consumers, key aspect of food system transformation, was mediated through a retail store, which in most cases, was designed to strengthen community interaction around food. Amplification processes were approached through a mix of actions based in local context, although patterns could be observed. Most FRCs were struggling to stabilize the organization after a rapid increase in consumer preferences during the pandemic followed by a rapid decrease due to high levels of inflation. However, FRCs focused into building resilience through several actions, such as community-building activities, volunteering, partnerships with stakeholders, event organization, establishing a friendly shopping atmosphere, providing several services, and making financial needs transparent to the community. Amplification by engagement of more consumers was approached differently by each model. Consumer cooperatives did not focus in growing, they collaborate and shared know-how, transferring practices to independent community groups to amplify the model and support the emergence of new independent FRC. Raiffeisen cooperatives had a different approach, as half of them had branches to reach more consumers and cover larger areas. From the total 170 stores run by FRCs, almost half are operated by six Raiffeisen cooperatives. Beside sporadically knowledge sharing, no significant relations between FRCs were found.

Yet, most of the amplification processes were identified by all participants to be hindered by conventional values. Participant acknowledged scarce interest from consumers, incongruent behaviour, low acceptance, no awareness, no importance placed on social components, and distance from policy makers, and recognized that price was still the most influencing element of consumers preferences. Rather than scaling-up to change rules, FRCs escalated-deep by spreading awareness of sustainability issues related to food systems, networking with food and non-food related stakeholders, and addressing inclusion of people with economic disadvantages through developing solidarity-driven actions. Although the closer relationship between producers and consumers, in most FRC there was not much direct interaction between producers and consumers beside isolated events. In producer cooperatives, producer shared a retailer to direct-sell to consumers. Consumers were mostly regular clients that did not participate in any decision beside individual purchase. On the contrary, consumer cooperatives purchased from producer of their choice and most decisions did not involve producers. FRCs have the challenge of further strength the relationships between producers and consumers and develop spaces for closer collaboration. This would mean for producer cooperative to explore mechanism of engaging consumers in the financing, operation and/or governance, and for consumers cooperative to develop closer partnerships with producers, and/or directly engage in productive activities. Furthermore, FRCs are part of larger food networks, and transforming food system would require changing the whole network. Strengthening relationships and collaborative spaces between local stakeholders and FRCs is then needed to amplify sustainable transformations. Further research should consider including relevant stakeholders to understand their problems and visions and find common pathways to support regional scale food system transformation.