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Motivations and Barriers for Engagement in Short Food Supply Chains: Insights from European Focus Groups

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to identify the motivations and the barriers that stakeholders face regarding Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC). Two focus groups with stakeholders of the agricultural sector and SFSC were conducted in the Netherlands and Switzerland. A first fundamental topic addressed by participants was the one related to the definition of SFSC, which is far from consensual, "short" being often associated and sometimes confused with local, direct, small, fair, ecological, fresh, healthy, etc. However, a series of positive and negative factors influencing SFSC development, and the involvement of agri-food stakeholders were identified. On the one hand, the unique relationship built through direct contact between producers and consumers, the fair distribution of value added in the chain that producers can find in engaging in SFSC, the increasing number of SFSC initiatives, the farm resilience, and territorial strategies that are being developed seem to be the most positive aspects, that can explain the trends moving towards these types of distribution channel.
On the other hand, many hindering factors were also identified, such as weak communication and marketing capacity of producers, and a lack of efficiency and cooperation between peers. The fierce competition of conventional distribution, using green washing, together with a profusion of labels, price issues, and unsuitable standards were mentioned as the main threats faced by SFSC actors.

Keywords: Collaboration; Communication; Mass market competition; Motivations; Short Food Supply Chains; Sustainability

1 Introduction

In Europe, food is mostly distributed through the mass market (i.e. hypermarkets, supermarkets and discounters), which contributes about 54% of total European edible grocery sales. In 2014, more than 60% of the market share was held by five retailers in 13 European countries (Augère-Granier, 2016). Moreover, private labels account for 30% of the food retail sales volumes in the west of Europe. In 2021, online sales experienced a significant growth due to consumers' demand for safe shopping alternatives during the COVID-19 pandemic (EuroCommerce & MCKinsey & Company, 2021). Furthermore, direct sales between producers and consumers represent 2% of the fresh food market. Among these sales, 15% of producers sell half or more of their

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products directly to consumers (Augère-Granier, 2016; Hyland et al., 2019).
For some years now, consumers are increasingly demanding more food of higher quality, freshness, further transparency in the food supply chains, and information on how it is made and by whom (Bentsen & Pedersen, 2020; De Bernardi & Tirabeni, 2018). In this regard, alternatives to conventional food chains are rising, such as short food supply chains (SFSCs) (Bentsen & Pedersen, 2020; De Bernardi & Tirabeni, 2018), especially in Europe and North America (Chiffoleau & Dourian, 2020). The definition of SFSC at the European level is:

> according to the European rural development regulation (1305/2013), a 'short supply chain' means a supply chain involving a limited number of economic operators, committed to co-operation, local economic development, and close geographical and social relations between producers, processors and consumers.

However, this definition is criticized and there is no consensus among stakeholders involved in the agri-food sector. Issues in this European definition include the ambiguity in "close geographical" relations. What is considered as close can be interpreted differently by diverse actors. As asserted by Renting et al. (2003), different SFSCs types can comprise several proximities. One can be geographical proximity with face-to-face interactions where consumers are purchasing their products at the production place (e.g. pick-your-own, farmers markets) and create interpersonal relationships with the producers. This proximity can be broaden when SFSCs are extending and are based on relations (e.g. Community Supported Agriculture), or cultural proximity (e.g. regional specialties sold to foreigners). Another extended SFSC type consists of extended relations, in which products can be exported and sold outside the region in which they were produced. In addition to the proximity aspect, the economic value is important in this type of food chain. Producers are seeking to improve their revenues and are willing to grab a greater part of the added-value (Kneafsey et al., 2013). Malak-Rawlikowska et al. (2019) found that producers who sell their products within short and long food chains are benefitting from an economic point of view by using SFSCs. These chains provide a high price premium compared to longer chains, as the margin proportion is captured by producers and not intermediaries of long chains. The variety and richness of SFSC models do not help the reaching of a consensus about the characterization of what is a SFSC. Similar terms can be used with contrary meaning (Massar, 2019). The concepts of "short", "local" and "organic" can be confusing for consumers. In defining SFSC, besides the proximities, the number of intermediaries and the economic value, the social and organizational aspects are highly important. Renting et al. (2003) highlighted the capacity of new food supply chains as SFSCs to "resocialise" food, allowing consumers to consume based on their own knowledge and experiences.
Previous research has already investigated the factors that are hindering the development of SFSCs. In the European project SKIN, the following bottlenecks were identified: "societal constraints, deficiencies in skills, a lack of resources, policy issues, and geographical fragmentation" (Hyland et al., 2019). Furthermore, research on the drivers of consumers' behaviour regarding short food supply chains were conducted by Giampietri et al. (2016), using the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The goal was to predict consumers' intention and behaviour towards SFSCs products purchase. Other studies focused on SFSCs as sustainable development levers, and on their implications on territorial and social innovation (Chiffoleau & Prevost, 2012; Galli & Brunori, 2013). Previous research lacks the depth necessary to be useful to practitioners and policy makers regarding SFSCs. Hence, the current analysis focused on the identification of barriers and facilitators related to SFSCs, together with practitioners and stakeholders in two countries. The identification of these factors aimed to guide researchers and policy makers in the design of adequate and efficient actions, and solutions to support producers in the development of SFSC initiatives.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Study design

Two focus groups were conducted during the summer of 2019, one in the Netherlands and one in Switzerland. The main aim was to deepen the understanding of the internal and external driving forces of short food supply chains. The obstacles and facilitators regarding the engagement of actors in SFSCs were identified. An inductive approach was used. Political recommendations were therefore proposed.

The participants of the two focus groups included practitioners (e.g. farmers and processors), representatives of public authorities and experts in the agricultural sector with knowledge in agricultural economics, marketing and knowledge transfer focused on food practitioners. Several food sectors were represented (i.e. fruits and vegetables, dairy, meat and cereals sectors). During the meeting, they were invited to share their point of view, following a rigorous but flexible methodological framework, ensuring the scientific validity of the results and mutual respect between the participants. The focus group approach was selected as it allows the investigation of complex human behaviour, attitudes, and motivations of the participants (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan & Krueger, 1993). The number of participants in a focus group does not give a statistically representative pool of opinions. Instead, the aim consists of collecting participants' insights and detailed opinions to get qualitative results. The diversity of participants' profiles fostered the identification of key issues in contrasting ways, and highlighted convergences and divergences between the different stakeholders' points of view. A literature review was conducted to complement the findings and outputs from the research report on strategic collective system building within the Dutch SFSCs sector and these, together with insights from the focus groups, were integrated into the research (Massar, 2019).

2.2 Structure of the focus group discussion

The focus groups were conducted in July 2019, with local moderators, in the local language in the case of Switzerland and in English in the case of the Netherlands. Each focus group took two to three hours to complete. The sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed in the original language and translated into English to ensure consistent content analysis.

The session started with a short Power Point presentation of the SMARTCHAIN project, and of the preliminary results of the questionnaire about the driving forces of SFSCs. Following this, the discussion was launched with guiding questions that are presented in Figure 1. The European definition of SFSCs was used as a starting point of discussion in the focus groups.

3 Results and Discussion

The internal and external positive and negative driving forces that were found to be acting on the development of SFSCs are presented in Table 1. These elements are developed in the following sections.

3.1 Internal strengths of short food supply chains

The value of a closer producer-consumer relationship

The relationship created between consumers and producers in short food supply chains is an important strength that was cited in the two focus groups. For Swiss participants, the direct link with the consumers allows the producers to tell the story of their products. It becomes possible to educate consumers on tastes and textures, to describe ways of cooking the products and to explain new consumption methods. A Swiss producer asserted:

> We also sold organic chicken at home from another producer. Many people complained: chicken is hard. Indeed, we are used to something else! The organic chicken is small, hard and ugly. You have to explain that it is a healthy texture, that it tastes good, and give a recipe, because you have to cook it

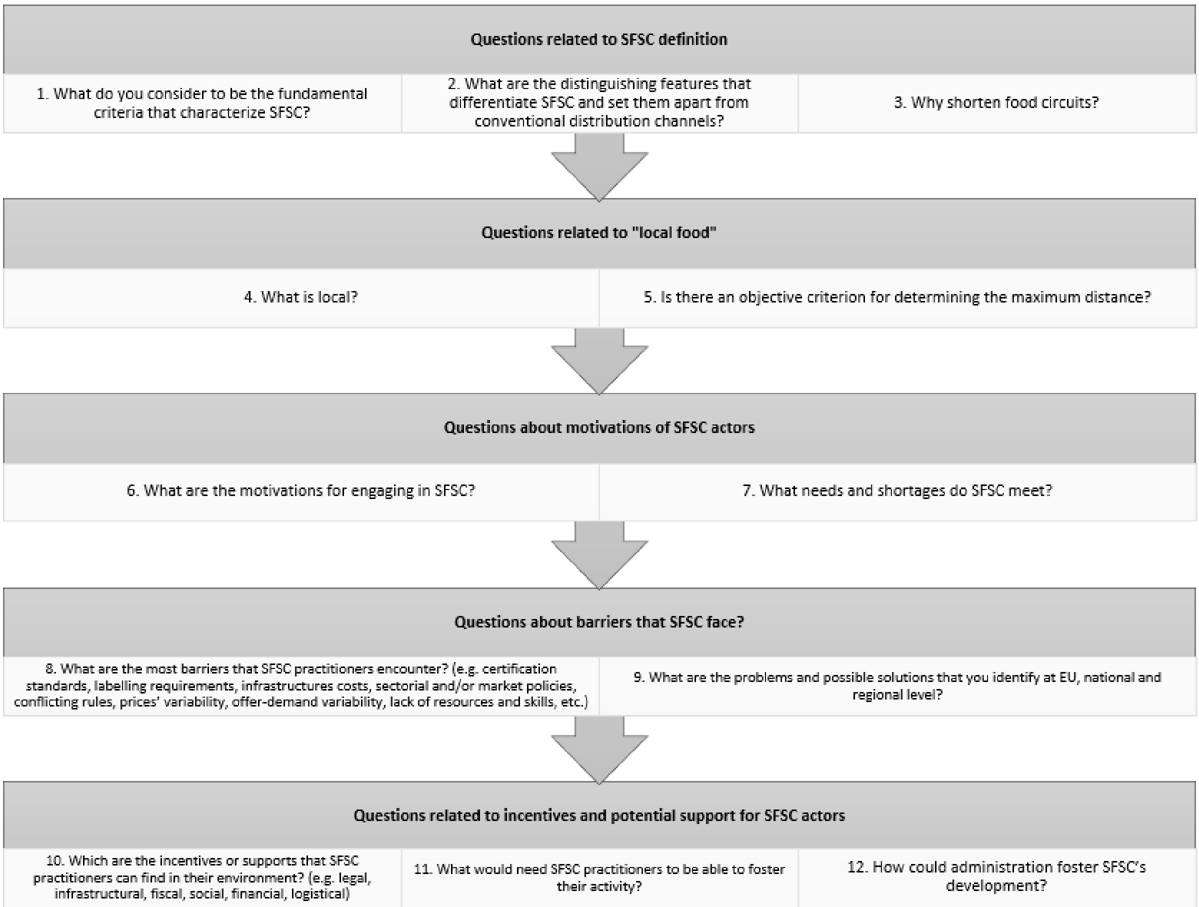

Figure 1: Questions addressed in the focus groups

> differently, and it works. So that in supermarkets, I can't sell, because I can't talk to the consumer.

In the Netherlands, participants of the focus group mentioned that a close relationship between producer and consumer implies a "re-appropriation" by consumers of their diet, a better knowledge and awareness about the food they buy, and thus positive nutritional, socioeconomic and environmental impacts. Consumers seem to value food from a nutritional and economic point of view. Besides, they also value food as a common social and cultural good that creates links within a community (EIP-AGRI, 2015).

More fair distribution of value added in the chain

Short food supply chains imply a more balanced distribution of economic value and decisional power within the value chain. Malak-Rawlikowska et al. (2019) found that producers who sell their products within short and long food chains are benefitting from an economic point of view by using SFSCs. The benefits that SFSCs bring to both the production and consumption sides constitute a powerful argument, which resonates with current social, economic and environmental issues. Benefits cited in both focus groups included economic and social empowerment of producers, high-quality food at

Table 1: Composition of the peel and pulp of genipap fruit

Internal strengths	***Internal weaknesses***
· Value of a closer producer-consumer relationship · More fair distribution of value added in the chain · Relationships based on trust and recognition · An aligned network and existing SFSC initiatives · Increased farm viability and resilience	· Lack of coordination and cooperation resulting in bottlenecks (e.g. inefficient logistics) · Lack of a clear and functional definition · Weak communication and marketing capacity
Opportunities	***External barriers***
· Strategies at different levels · Mutual benefits through collaborations · Certifications for transparency and quality guarantee · Consumers' increasing demand and awareness · Increasing sustainability criteria in public procurement rules	· Difficult access to land and reduced access to financing · Consumer choices criteria · Inappropriate legislations and infrastructures · Mass distribution competition

better prices for consumers, more transparency and quality guarantees for consumers, rural and local development, community building and creation of social links.

Furthermore, the domain of food science and technology increasingly focuses on consumer behaviour. Silva et al. (2018) analysed the four main cycles of knowledge development in this domain from the 1950s to the 21st century. They found that scientific and technological development must take into account new consumption patterns. Stakeholders of the food value chain, and in particular the industry, must improve the approach to consumers. Moreover, the number of scientific articles that relate to consumer behaviour increased between 1993 and 2013. Kasemodel et al. (2016) found that the main topics that come out of the analysis are sensory, health, safety, willingness to pay, packaging, ethics, and convenience.

Relationships based on trust and recognition

According to the participants of the focus groups, SFSCs guarantee more food safety and transparency, through trust mechanisms. In a direct sale relationship, the pledge of quality relies on personal trust. When the system scales-up, and consumers are no longer in direct contact with producers, other mechanisms are needed to warrant quality, such as blockchain platforms, that "transport evidence" throughout the chain. This argument was highlighted in the Netherlands.

A Swiss producer also spoke about "a more rewarding and healthier commercial relationship" for both the producer and the consumer. This implies a notion of social and economic recognition from the producer, and introduce trust and transparency as fundamental elements.

A lot of existing short food supply chains initiatives

There are increasing number of SFSC initiatives in Europe (Jarzcebowski et al., 2020), with a focus social, community and environmental issues. There is a high potential of cooperation and social innovation. However, participants expressed a need for more collaboration and coordination to make logistics more efficient, to reach a critical mass of sales and to enrich the variety of the supply. In this regard, Dutch SFSCs practitioners seem to be quite efficiently organized and coordinated at regional level. There are over 3,000 farmers selling their local products directly to consumers on farm or via web shops and speciality retailers, including all types of direct sale practices (Massar, 2019). A dozen regional food hubs are working, such as Local2Local in the area of Utrecht or FlevoFood in the province of Flevoland. Therefore, combining city functions with food production will allow the formation of a crux in which regional wholesalers can distribute locally grown food (Massar, 2019). Initiatives in Austria, Greece, France and Norway were reported by Kneafsey et al. (2013) and Vittersø et al. (2019). Their goals are to promote rural development and agriculture, to provide marketing assistance at the regional level, to develop web-based schemes for the management of orders and payments to support farmers with skills (e.g. IT and marketing skills) and to create sustaining traditional networks in which farmers can cooperate with peers.

Increased farm viability and resilience

The concept of SFSCs allows the diversification of the business models beyond the traditional marketing channels used by conventional long food chains. Farms become more resilient and economic uncertainties are reduced to the contrary of the market volatility of long chains (Boutry & Ferru, 2016; Ripoll-Bosch et al., 2012).
Many producers said that they took the decision to change their way of producing and commercializing driven by a feeling of anger towards an unhealthy, socially and environmentally unfair food system. These innovators are used to being highly committed to their community and environmental engagement, who want to retake the control on the value chain of their products. This is supported by ***Q1*** **Vitterso et al. (2019)** that found "a sense of community" is appreciated by producers, consumers and other SFSCs actors.

3.2 Weak points of short food supply chains

Lack of coordination and cooperation

In the Netherlands, many respondents pointed out the lack of cooperation and coordination between SFSCs parties, which results in a fragmented, unreliable and uncoordinated supply (insufficient or excessive, unmatched between needs and demand), and an inefficient logistics system (constrained by limited production volumes handled in SFSCs, making it difficult to meet demand from increasing number of customers). Many new initiatives are developing, but the existing ones appeared to have trouble in consolidating and scaling-up. Support provided at the regional and national levels should foster the coordination of actors by encouraging them to think about common interests, reinforcing the network in which they operate.

> In terms of logistics, today we have everything we need to do it well. We have never had so many means of transport, communication, but we still have a lot of bad will (a representative of a Swiss sectorial association)

The participants also mentioned the lack of time and skills of producers to develop these aspects. It is necessary to think about complemental partners, while ensuring their good coordination, both at the farm level and at the regional level, in order to be able to offer a wide variety of products to consumers. The development of centralization and coordination platforms was mentioned as an important need to fulfil these functions, structures that should remain in the hands of producers. These platforms could be supported by public funding, establishing pilot phases to identify the most efficient system that will ensure a good coordination between actors.

Lack of a clear and functional definition of SFSC

In both countries, there is a lack of a clear, functional and consensual definition of SFSC. What is “short”? Is it only a matter of distance or number of intermediaries between the primary producer and the final consumer? Is it related to the size of companies involved? To the production methods? Does short mean organic/biological? To make possible peer-to-peer cooperation and external communication, to consumers and authorities, a functional and consensual definition is needed.

The European definition was the starting point of the discussion. However, it was highly criticized by the participants of both focus groups. Within the Dutch panel, the importance of the collaborative and value dimension was quite consensual. The mere criteria of “maximum one intermediary” was unanimously rated as senseless, even combined with a notion of distance, which is furthermore very difficult to quantify: how many kilometres is “local”? They insisted that a lot about the nature of the intermediaries and of the relationships within the value chain, was with regards to their social impact (in terms of community building, social inclusion, health, etc.) and philosophy. For them, non-profit spirit, fair collaboration and community building were an integral part of SFSCs. They contrasted social impact and community building of SFSCs versus capitalist logic of profit making and competition of big distribution. The nature of the links within and between the value chains seemed to be a key element for most of them.

In the Swiss focus group, the term of ”locality” was discussed, and questions like what is local or what is a region were raised. Territory appeared as a rather subjective notion, which does not only imply a determined physical distance, but also questions of identity: Is there an objective criterion for determining the maximum distance? With which territory does the consumer identify him/herself? The territory size can vary considerably from one context to another.

The social component of SFSCs was stressed, with a definition in terms of a close, strong and direct relationship between producers and consumers, in a reciprocal movement from consumers to producers and from producers to consumers. This implies a reduction in the geographical distance between the two, but also a reduction in the number of intermediaries (even if a definition in terms of maximum number of intermediaries seems too restrictive).

In the Swiss discussion, some participants focused more on the producer perspective. SFSCs imply a restructuring of flows that promotes the economic and social empowerment of producers, giving them more decision-making and financial power. In this perspective, the number of intermediaries no longer seemed important. The question is rather ”to whom does the intermediary respond?”. If producers outsource part of the manufacturing of their products, while retaining control and price, then the chain remains short. What matters is the added-value and the decision-making power that is more equitably distributed, and that a larger share go to the primary sector. Other participants preferred to give more weight to the consumer perspective, adding that from a political and strategic point of view, the consumer could be a more powerful lever.

Weak communication and marketing capacity

The lack of capacity and resources (workforce, money, time, skills, knowledge, and expertise) of SFSC actors to tackle the numerous tasks and challenges related to a SFSC activity (marketing, communication, management, networking, logistic operation, etc.) was pointed out in the two focus groups. SFSC actors do not deny the powerful marketing deployed by mass distribution. A representative of a Swiss sectorial association pointed out that communication is an activity that requires skills and knowledge that farmers do not necessarily have. A specific communication strategy should be designed to allow farmers selling their goods.

3.3 Opportunities for short food supply chains

Strategies at different levels

The growing interest towards alternative food chains from different actors are pushing the development of different strategies. They are implemented at different levels: regional, national and international. In Switzerland, five pilot projects are about to start, two of them in French-speaking Switzerland. Some of the participants of the Swiss focus group saw great potential in urban food planning, where favourable conditions in public procurement could be granted to SFSCs.

In the Netherlands, a strategy for the national collaboration between SFSC actors was set up, relying on a clear vision of transition dynamics and innovation systems theories. This strategy depends on a collective system building approach based on the GAIN transition model. This model is inspired by the Market Transformation Model (Simons & Nijhof, 2020) and the Innovation System transition models (Hekkert & Negro, 2009), aiming at systemic impact. The GAIN transition model consists of the implementation of network formation and strategic niche management by using gamification principles. There are four levels of engagement and collaboration for SFSC stakeholders: local, regional, national and international. The model offers opportunities to increase the competitiveness and sustainability of short chains with practical solutions. For example, the national level brings together a variety of actors (e.g. farmers, experts, authorities, etc.), connecting all the existing regional alliances, to make the SFSC model grow to be more inclusive, betting on a systemic approach to challenge the system. In this perspective, scaling-up will occur through a "compagnonnage" movement and ecosystem approach, using a national hub such as the entrepreneurial initiative Taskforce Korte Keten (TKK) to foster SFSC development. Furthermore, political efforts to relocate the food and agricultural systems are in line with what SFSCs wish to promote (Sonnino, 2016).

Besides the regional and national strategies that are flourishing across all different countries, strategies at the EU level also expand initiatives like the "Farm to Fork" strategy, which is at the heart of the European Green Deal. The main goal is to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly, to implement a change in the way food is produced and sold (European Commission, 2020).

Collaborations

Several examples of collaboration with communities were mentioned in the Swiss focus group to illustrate the opportunity they represent for local producers. Many schools, businesses and hospitals are interested in supporting the local economy of their region and providing their staff, patients, students with quality, local food. Mass distribution can also be an ally for SFSCs, although ambivalent. The example of its involvement in the development and growth of the Swiss organic sector was cited. Collaborations with universities of food engineering were also mentioned as potential resources that are rarely exploited. They can provide advice and information to farmers on production, processing and marketing methods. Universities of Applied Sciences in Switzerland are interested in working on practical cases, which could also help to fill the gap that often exists between research and firms, and reduce the delay to provide concrete solutions.

Certifications for transparency and quality guarantee

For a majority of participants, since the relationship between producers and consumers is based on trust, products sold through direct sales do not need labels. Trust is enough to guarantee the transparency and quality of the products. However, when the network expands and the producer is no longer in direct contact with their customer, other mechanisms can take over, such as a rating system or certification through criteria collectively defined by producers and consumers.

Consumers' increasing demand and awareness

In a study by Eurobarometer (2011), a survey carried out on 26,713 EU citizens showed that 90% of respondents agreed that buying local food is beneficial and that the EU should promote their availability (Eurobarometer, 2011). It has been demonstrated that consumers like to buy local foods (i.e. food that is locally produced and/or locally consumed) for several reasons, "including environmental concerns, health reasons, perception that local foods are high quality, the enjoyment of shopping at local outlets, and to support local farmers, economies and communities" (Kirwan, 2004; Kneafsey et al., 2013; Seyfang, 2007). This is supported by Nunes et al. (2020) that asserted that the demand for healthier and sustainable food is growing all over the world. The shift from the importance of food quantity towards food quality through differentiation has been identified by the authors. Moreover, social and community recognition were mentioned as important supports for SFSC in the focus groups.

Increasing sustainability criteria in public procurement rules

Public procurement rules are still quite unfavourable to SFSCs. However, sustainability criteria are increasing in the Netherlands. One actor stated that the sustainable procurement policies for governmental organisations are mentioned as an opportunity for SFSCs to gain governmental support fulfilling all the sustainability criteria. This opportunity is being addressed officially by the Dutch Minister of Agricultural in collaboration with the 12 Provinces and the TKK in order to supply governmental and semi-governmental catering companies with local supply (Taskforce Korte Keten, 2020). This example ought to be implemented in different national contexts that aim to support SFSCs in different regions in the EU.

3.4 External obstacles for short food supply chains

Difficult access to land and reduced access to financing

Nowadays, the number of farms decreases while the size of the remaining ones increases. The lack of available space is a real threat for the agricultural sector, in terms of access to land and capital. This is the case for any farmer who wants to establish themselves, especially for those who do not have a background in farming or are from land owning families, regardless of the chain length (e.g. short food chain or long food chain) and the chosen distribution model. This obstacle was discussed by many actors of the Dutch focus group. They mentioned the difficulty of access to public or private financing.

Kneafsey et al. (2013) wrote about different instruments of the rural development policy targeting short and long food chains. These include "restructuration, modernization support, different measures supporting the development of local markets (measures on 'adding value', 'quality schemes', 'microenterprises' or 'off-farm diversification') and private-public partnerships in local development". These examples of policy measures should be considered at different level (i.e. regional and national) to help farmers developing their enterprise and participating in the dynamics of SFSCs.

Consumer choices criteria

In Switzerland, the average consumer generally spends only a small part of their budget on food. Price and practical accessibility remain decisive criteria for the vast majority of consumers, at the expense of SFSCs that remain a non-dominant organization chain compared to the long chains. Some producers express a need to understand the consumers' motivations to direct their sales and communication strategy. Others insist on the importance of educating consumers (e.g. training cooks of collective restaurants). Public campaigns could be designed to "educate" consumers on the basics of food commodities (e.g. seasonality of production, environmental issues of agricultural production and food consumption, packaging, and other several topics that consumers are aware of but they do not know in detail the whys and wherefores).

Inappropriate legislations and infrastructures

The infrastructures are highly developed in the Netherlands. However, they are tailored to suit large-scale practices and the export model of the country. They do not fit SFSC needs in terms of logistics and distribution. The laws and regulations focusing on agricultural practices and on food retail practices (i.e. hygiene regulations,

product liabilities, food safety plans, hygiene protocols, waste processing and transport restrictions) “create barriers for SFSC actors, accompanied with the high costs of the control protocols which are irrelevant for SFSCs” (Massar, 2019). The example of a small chicken farm that has commercialized its own production by selling directly to the final consumer was discussed in the Dutch focus group.
On this topic, specific regulations for SFSCs should be developed to facilitate farmers' activities. This could include adapted hygiene and food safety standards, simplification of transport and logistics restrictions, reduction of control protocols and other administrative duties, to reflect the local and sectoral specificities.

Mass distribution competition

« Green washing » and labels

The mass retail sector has a great capacity to pick up new trends, following the increasing demand of consumers for eco-friendly, local and socially fair food. The sector integrates these trends into marketing and communication strategies, without a substantial change in the business strategy. The focus group participants compared SFSCs situation with the boom in organic farming several years ago. Small producers started to propose organic and local products to interested consumers. Supermarkets used marketing strategy to communicate on these products, without transparency. SFSC actors see it as an imposture, because the essential goal of SFSC is missing (i.e. having a positive social impact on local communities and society).

Uncompetitive prices

Large-scale distribution has a high level of logistical efficiency, together with critical volumes that enable it to achieve economies of scale and offer out-of-competition prices to the consumer.

> For a product like meat, supermarkets can afford economies of scale that we can't afford; the local butcher is still expensive (a Dutch producer).
>
> It seems very hard for SFSC actors to compete on price. They are forced to find other sales arguments. For comparable quality, products sold through direct sales are not always necessarily more expensive than in mass distribution, depending on the product type.
>
> It's easier to explain the price, because there is this direct contact. My pasta is expensive, but people keep buying, because there is history with it. It's easier to have a price that corresponds to the cost of production, because you can tell it, explain it” (a Swiss producer).

Difficulty to reach standards

Participants pointed out that the mass-market system set very high standards and a wide range of services offered, which consumers are used to and that they then expect from SFSCs. However, it is difficult for SFSCs to reach those standards (opening hours, offered product range, delivery services, etc.), especially at these prices. This is linked with the need for more cooperation and collaboration between producers, to share costs and investments (e.g. to run a shop).

4 Conclusions

The understanding of the factors that support and hinder the development of SFSCs is a vast programme, since each type of SFSC and each local, regional and national context have their own features and challenges. However, the results of these two focus groups, together with a literature review, gave interesting insights. They allowed us to draw some preliminary conclusions that can contribute to the adjustment of the actions intended to foster the shift towards SFSCs. These chains that were considered alternatives of the conventional long food chains are gaining consideration by a variety of stakeholders that are concerned by environmental and socio-economic issues. Indeed, although the focus groups took place in two specific contexts, the comparison between both helped to draw conclusions beyond these specific environments and to the design of targeted solutions to promote SFSC models.
Among the positive supports in SFSC development, the interaction between producer and con-

sumer was mentioned as a key element, since it gives the opportunity for producers to get feedback from consumers, allowing an "organic matching" between supply and demand, through small adjustments based on feedback. This direct relationship, based on trust, also guarantees transparency, and allows producers to attain a larger part of the product value. In addition, growing SFSC initiatives and strategies across regions in Switzerland and the Netherlands are forming an increasing critical mass within the agricultural sector. In doing so, they are creating a huge potential for cooperation and scaling-up, attracting more and more attention and interest from consumers and public authorities, and challenging the conventional agri-food system that they want to escape from.

On the other hand, the most prominent bottlenecks underlined in this study included societal constraints (e.g. legislations, regulations, hygiene standards and infrastructures), deficiencies in skills, lack of resources, policy issues, and geographical fragmentation. The growing number of SFSC initiatives are still missing coordination, in terms of logistics and advocacy. Indeed, they need more political union to defend their interests at political level and to change unsuitable legislations and standards, which were conceived for big distribution and severely disadvantage SFSCs.

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