Can Alternative Food Networks contribute to a transition towards sustainability in Flanders: Assessing the marketing functions of Voedselteams

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Abstract

Current sustainability challenges in the dominant agro-food regime highlight the need for a systemic transition towards sustainability. It has been argued that, as a reaction to these sustainability challenges, niches have arisen that reorganise their practices in order to contribute to a more sustainable food system. These niches may in turn be seeds for a systemic transition. One specific type of such niches are Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). AFNs have already been researched in-depth from the perspective of two theories: the Multi-Level Perspective and Social Practice Theory, as well as through their combined use. Nevertheless, these studies have mainly focused on sustainability transitions in production and consumption. In this article we argue that this omits an important element of the food supply chain, namely all the activities between production and consumption. We take a holistic approach by looking at food supply chains as consisting of nine marketing functions. We do this by researching a particular type of AFN – Voedselteams - in Flanders. We find that, whereas in the dominant regime these functions are performed in a highly specialized way, within AFNs, they become more intertwined as more responsibility is taken up by consumers and producers. Yet, as initiatives grow, they might start taking up 'regime-elements' again in order to cope with the size. In this way, these initiatives may become hybrids between niche and regime.

Key Words: Alternative Food Networks; Voedselteams; Marketing functions; Multi-Level Perspective; Social Practice theory.

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Can Alternative Food Networks contribute to a transition towards sustainability in Flanders? Assessing the marketing functions of Voedselteams.

1. Introduction

Our current food system has created historical levels of abundance. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that several persistent problems are connected to it. Economically, the agro-food sector has found itself in a crisis since 2008. In recent years, this crisis has continued to worsen and has now been referred to as *"the worst agriculture crisis in recent decades* (European Parliament , 2016)*",* characterized by dwindling incomes for farmers, decreasing prices for agricultural produce, and an increasing amount of farmers not being able to pay their bills or earn a living (European Parliament , 2016). Environmentally, the dominant agro-food regime is said to lead to soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, degradation of landscapes, resource depletion, climate change, a loss of genetic resources, pollution, excessive use of water, ocean acidification, land use problems exploitation of non-renewable resources, etcetera (Belz, 2004; Pérez-Vitoria, 2010). It has also been argued that the dominant agro-food system is characterized by strong power imbalances, in which producers and consumers are squeezed out by dominant multinationals (McMicheal, 2009; Pérez-Vitoria, 2010; van der Ploeg, 2008). A growing awareness of these issues has put them on political agendas and partly incorporated them in everyday discourses of people, enterprises and politicians (Pérez-Vitoria, 2010; Shove, 2014; van der Ploeg, 2008).

It is increasingly being argued that systemic changes are indispensable to deal with the highly complex nature of the problems described above in order to meet the needs of the future. This is also referred to as the need to foster transitions towards sustainability. Geels et al. (2004) argue: "*such system innovations not only involve new technological artifacts, but also new markets, user practices, regulations, infrastructures and cultural meanings* (p. 1)."

The unsustainabilities connected to the dominant agro-food system have increasingly led to the emergence of niches that aim at a more sustainable food system. One type of such niches are Alternative Food Networks (AFNs). AFNs can be seen as "*food systems that differ from the dominant agro-food system and are created as a reaction to the conventional productivist paradigm. AFNs can designate a wide variety of practices, organizations and institutions. The only common characteristic they have is that they take distance with respect to the dominant market-oriented channels of food. (….) All AFNs share the characteristic that they de-commoditize food provisioning, so that the products offered through these networks are not*

solely brought on the market in order to fulfil consumers' needs, but also because other characteristics or values they might fulfil (social, cultural, etc.) (Bauler, et al., 2011, p. 45).

Niches may be seen as seeds for systemic change and the reasons for their emergence and ways to foster them have therefore been researched extensively. In a first phase this research was mostly focused on primary production. Later, it was argued that this perspective was too narrow, and several scholars argued for a widened perception. Therefore, studies focused on end-users (Geels, 2004) and consumers (Spaargaren et al., 2012) were introduced.

Although this may be considered a step forward, we argue that the current vision is still too narrow as it omits to assess the overall sustainability performance of a food supply chain (Edwards-Jones, 2010). In this research, we will thus take a more holistic perspective by focusing on food provisioning as "*a complex of alliances between farmers, agents, merchants, manufacturers, distributors, processors, retailers and final consumers* (Marshall, 2001, p. 326)." It is important to see food supply chains as consisting of different sub-regimes, that, despite strong specialization, are connected to each other but each have their own dynamics. Within niches, these functions are performed often in a fundamentally different way. Although this may contribute in some cases to an increased overall sustainability of the food chain, they may also encounter new problems. Hence, to be successful, alternative socio-technical food systems have to address these distribution activities and develop performant alternatives.

We will provide an example of analysing on the basis of the nine marketing functions. The nine functions are: buying, selling, storing, transportation, processing, standardization, financing, risk bearing and marketing intelligence (Beierlein, et al., 2008; Crawford, 2006). At the focus of this article is one particular Flemish AFN: *Voedselteams* (Food Teams) a specific type of collective food buying groups. Collective food buying groups are seen as the one of the most promising social innovations in current attempts to transition to sustainable food systems. This is because of two reasons. First, they provide an economic niche that is attractive to a growing number of consumers. Second, they still allow for experimentation and learning from new ways of producing, consuming and distributing (Dedeurwaedere, et al., 2015).

The article is built up as follows. Section 2 further elaborates on the theoretical foundations behind the use of the nine marketing functions as an innovative and useful framework. Furthermore, we will discuss the use of a combined framework of the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and Social Practice Theory (SPT) and the way in which these theories can be useful in research on transitions to sustainability. Section 3 deals with the materials and methods used in this research. Section 4 presents the results of the research. For the sake of readability and brevity, we will elaborate on four marketing functions analysed through a MLP/SPT

perspective. This will lead us to the final discussion on the outcomes of the usage of the marketing functions as analysed through a combined MLP/SPT perspective.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1 Marketing functions

In a first phase of transition research, most attention was focused on sustainability transitions in primary production. Later, scholars argued for a widened perception. For example, in her review on literature on Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) Tregear (2011) pointed out the continued lack of a consumer perspective by arguing that the "*continued narrowness of perspective (…) underplays the contribution that consumers make to food systems. That is, an on-going preoccupation exists with the needs of actors situated upstream in the supply chain, most notably agricultural production managers, at the expense of others in the chain* (p. 427)." Also authors like Geels (2004) and Spaargaren et al. (2012) argued for a widened perspective on end-users and consumers in research on transitions to sustainability. What followed was a large body of research on the role of the consumer in transitions towards sustainability (e.g. Bauler, et al., 2011; Crivits & Paredis, 2013; van Gameren, et al., 2015; Gram-Hanssen, 2011; McMeekin & Southerton, 2012; Shove, 2014).

At the same time it was argued that, although this could be considered a step forward, it was still too narrow since food supply chains consist of more than production and consumption alone. Therefore, researches on the sustainability of other links of the food chain were conducted. E.g. multiple studies on sustainability transitions in transport were done (Avetisyan et al., 2014; Kemp & Rotmans, 2004; Pieters, 2013). Nevertheless, "*a problem with this viewpoint is that transport is only one part of the overall food system* (Edwards-Jones, 2010, p. 583)*".*

To our knowledge, more holistic studies on sustainability taking into account multiple links of food supply chains have remained scarce. Yet, we argue that such studies are necessary as some elements in food supply chains may offset the sustainability effects of production, transport and consumption levels. In this article, we therefore take a holistic perspective on food provisioning by seeing food supply chains as "*a complex of alliances between farmers, agents, merchants, manufacturers, distributors, processors, retailers and final consumers* (Marshall, 2001, p. 326)." Concretely, we do this by looking at food supply chains as consisting of nine different categories that together constitute the marketing process. The nine functions are: buying, selling, storing, transportation, processing, standardization, financing, risk bearing and

marketing intelligence. They are further explained in table 1 (Beierlein, et al., 2008; Crawford, 2006; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Weld, 1917). Within the dominant agro-food system these functions are performed in a highly specialised way by specialised actors, such as traders, processors, banks, insurance companies, inspection firms, etc. Each of these actors has developed its own logics and rules and tries to impose these onto other actors in the food system, primarily the weakest actors, that is, farmers and consumers (Edwards-Jones, 2010).

We hypothesise that niche initiatives that aim to render the food system more sustainable organise these marketing functions differently . On the one hand these reconfigurations may render the food system more sustainable. On the other hand, they may challenge these initiatives with new problems (e.g. efficiency of transportation systems). Hence, to be successful food systems have to address these distribution activities and develop performant alternatives.

TABLE 1: THE MARKETING FUNCTIONS EXPLAINED (BASED ON: BEIERLEIN, ET AL., 2008; CRAWFORD, 2006; SHETH & PARVATIYAR, 1995; WELD, 1917

	Function	Explanation
Exchange functions	**1. Buying**	Overcome separation of ownership. The seller offers a product that is wanted by the buyer, and exchanges something in return. In this way, the legal title of the product is transferred from buyer to seller.
	2. Selling	
Physical functions	**3. Storing**	Overcomes separation of time. As agricultural products are seasonal, storage can balance supply and demand by smoothening supply throughout the year and keeping the produce in good condition between production and final sale.
	4. Transportation	Overcomes separation of space. Makes the product available where it is needed.
	5. Processing	Overcomes value separation. Processing is a form changing activity meant to increase the utility for the consumer and thereby increasing the value.
Facilitating Functions	**6. Standardization**	Overcomes information separation. Establishes and maintains uniform measurements for quality and quantity. It simplifies buying and selling and reduces marketing costs.
	7. Financing	Overcomes value, time and space separation. It is meant to bridge the time between the buying of the raw material, producing, processing, storing and transportation and receiving the payment for selling by providing the funds needed for these actions.
	8. Risk bearing	Overcomes time separation. Risk bearing assumes physical (e.g. fire, pests and floods) and market risks (e.g. changes in values or consumer tastes) between purchase and sale. Perhaps the most important risk is that of price fluctuation. This risk can be overcome by creating surplus in earlier stages, or it can be borne by organizations and companies.

	9. Marketing intelligence	Overcomes information separation. Reduces the level of risk in decision making by collecting, interpreting and disseminating information on prices, inventory levels, embargoes and other incidents that may influence the buying and selling of products. This then concerns both exogenous market factors that have an influence on the needs and preferences of consumers, as well as the current and future needs of consumers (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990)

This framework is a valuable extension of the production/consumption divide and will allow us to analyse food initiatives in more detail and more holistically. Nevertheless, it does not provide us with a comprehensive theory on *how* to study these functions. Therefore, we will further elaborate on the use of two increasingly popular theories in research into transitions towards sustainability in the following paragraphs.

2.2 Multi-Level Perspective and Social Practice Theory

Within the field of sustainability innovation studies, there has been an increasing attention to two theoretical approaches. Even though both are concerned with systemic changes to sustainability, it has been argued that they are fundamentally different, especially in the ways in which they understand how transitions towards sustainability come about.

The Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) deals with the vertical levels of society. The MLP views transitions as non-linear processes that result from the interplay of developments at three analytical levels: (1) landscape, (2) socio-technical regimes and (3) niches or novelties. The first – landscape - determines the long-term exogenous trends at a macro-level that are beyond the direct influence of actors. They cannot be changed at will, but in the long term they can be influenced by the other two levels. The second - socio-technical regimes - can be seen as concrete empirical domains at the meso-level, like food, mobility or energy. They are characterized by relatively stable rules, routines, beliefs and capabilities and competencies, lifestyles and regulations. These elements are in turn aligned with infrastructures and organizations. Regimes, therefore, are characterized by lock-in. Socio-technical regimes can be analysed through three dimensions: rules & institutions, human actors and organizations & social groups. These three analytic dimensions are constantly influencing each other. So, even though socio-technical regimes are characterized by path-dependency and lock-in, they are not static. Moreover, socio-technical regimes are linked to each other. Thus, although they are relatively autonomous they are also interdependent. The third level - niches or novelties - is where many innovations struggle against existing regimes. Some of these innovations will later be taken up by the regime, while others will fade away. If successful, over time these niches

stabilise. Niches consist of the same dimensions as socio-technical regimes (rules & institutions, human actors and organizations & social groups), but are characterized by the fact that these are generally less articulated and clear-cut than in socio-technical regimes.

Transition in this view is thought to stem from the interplay between these levels. In the first place, there are long term waves on the landscape level. The developments that take place on a landscape level can put pressure on the regime that is fairly stable. The pressures that the landscape puts on this level can open up opportunities for niches and novelties to grow. These niches can be crucial for transitions, since they provide the seeds for systemic change. In time, niche-innovations may start influencing the existing socio-technical regime. Nonetheless, many of these initiatives may perish along the way. At the same time, the socio-technical regime also influences what happens in the niche. A new order thus may exist that is a hybrid between the initial niche-innovation and the old socio-technical regime. In the end, the new regime may influence what happens on a landscape level (Geels, 2004; Geels, 2013)

Even though it has been widely used, it has also been argued that this framework is too narrow to look at transitions towards sustainability. Therefore, in this research we use the MLP in combination with Social Practice Theory (SPT). On a basic level, SPT deals with the way in which people behave in their everyday lives and how this is connected to broader systems. Instead of regarding behaviour and acts as single units, practice theory is concerned with the way in which practices are embedded entities in a wider framework of both material and socio-cultural elements (Shove, 2014; Spaargaren, 2011).

In this sense, practices can only be "*usefully understood as an outcome of the routine reproduction of ordinary practices (…)* so that "*in essence (…) practices – what individuals do – reflect the pursuit of shared goals within a particular socio-technical setting* (Shove, 2014, p. 417). The practice approach thus constitutes a move away from the notion that, in order to foster a transition towards sustainability, individual behaviours and attitudes should be adapted. Instead, practices are seen as reproductive processes, with interconnected elements of which individuals form but one part (Crivits & Paredis, 2013; Shove, 2014).

Even though definitions between authors may differ, practices have been generally looked at in a three-tiered way: the individual level, a material structure and a social or cultural structure. In figure 1, an operationalized social practice framework can be found as proposed by Crivits & Paredis (2013).

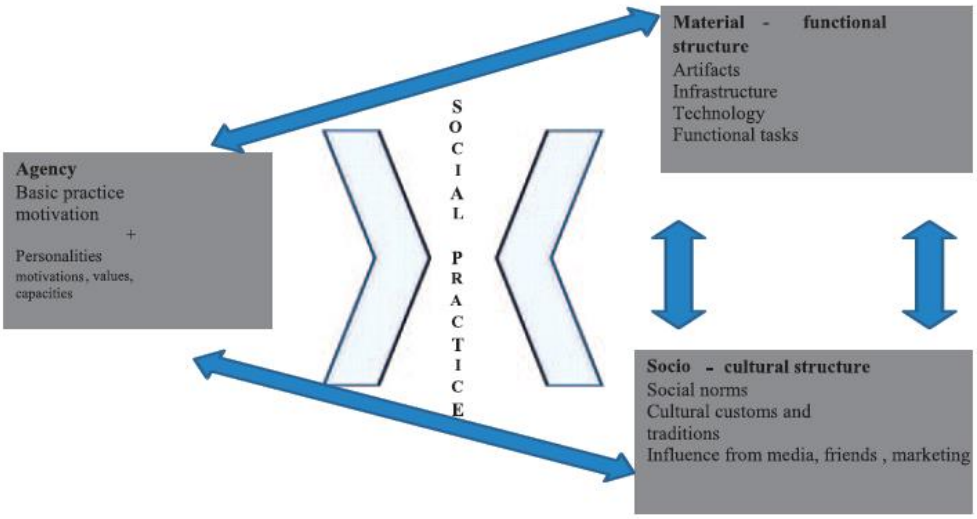

FIGURE 1: THREE TIERED FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING SOCIAL PRACTICES (CRIVITS & PAREDIS, 2013)

Looking at this figure more closely, we notice that social practices basically consist of two separate levels. First, there is the level of agency. This is the individual level and is mainly concerned with attitudes and behaviours that form the basis for a practice. It is thus "*the necessary condition for a successful agency reproduction and its sustained interaction with the co-evolving material and immaterial structure. This is what maintains the practice* (Crivits & Paredis, 2013, p. 317)".

On the other hand, we find the level of structure. Structure here is understood in a dual way, having both a material and immaterial dimension. The material part of structure contains those things that are tangible, like infrastructures and artefacts that are a part of the practice. Skills are an important aspect here, since they make up the ability to fulfil the key activities of a practice. The immaterial dimension on the other hand, contains the non-tangible aspects of structure, meaning the social and cultural dimensions that are at play in human practices like norms and beliefs, social groups, customs, attitudes, influence of media and the role these elements play in shaping human behaviour (Crivits & Paredis, 2013).

Practices are formed, changed and normalized as the links between the different elements are made, maintained and broken. In this respect, innovation is about the creation or destruction of the links between the different elements. Consequently, practices can be stabilized through repeated performances by different individuals. In this way, practices can become interweaved in historical developments, technologies and cultures (Hargreaves, et al., 2013; Shove, 2014). Practices are thus expressions of the ways in which normality is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Hence, they form a part of systems of practices in which path dependencies are

created. This shows us an explanation for the stability of practices and therefore the profound challenges involved in changing them (Crivits & Paredis, 2013; Hargreaves, et al., 2013; Spaargaren, 2011; Shove, 2014).

2.3 Combining MLP and SPT

Hargreaves et al. (2013) argue that combining both theories can be beneficial, as both have something extra to offer:

*"The MLP allows one to examine the emergence of novelty through the interactions between the **vertically ordered levels** of niche, regime, and landscape, while SPT focuses attention instead on the **horizontal dynamics** of practices that cut across multiple regimes as they follow their circuits of reproduction* (Hargreaves, et al, 2013, p. 407, bold added)*."*

With this in mind, we follow Hargreaves et al. (2013) in their proposition to both use MLP as SPT to be able to look at:

1. Transitions in regimes as they occur through interactions between niches, regimes and landscapes ('the vertical');
2. Transitions in practices as they occur through change and continuity in different circuits of reproduction (the 'horizontal') and;
3. How regimes and practices interconnect and bump into one another in the course of transition processes through points of intersection between the 'vertical' and the 'horizontal', these points of interconnection may entail both constraints and possibilities and express themselves in different forms. Most important in this perspective are the critical points of intersection "*those points of intersection that constrain innovations – whether in regimes or practices – from emerging and taking hold within and across different times and places* (Hargreaves, et al., 2013, p. 416)*"*.

These notions have been schematically represented in Figure 2.

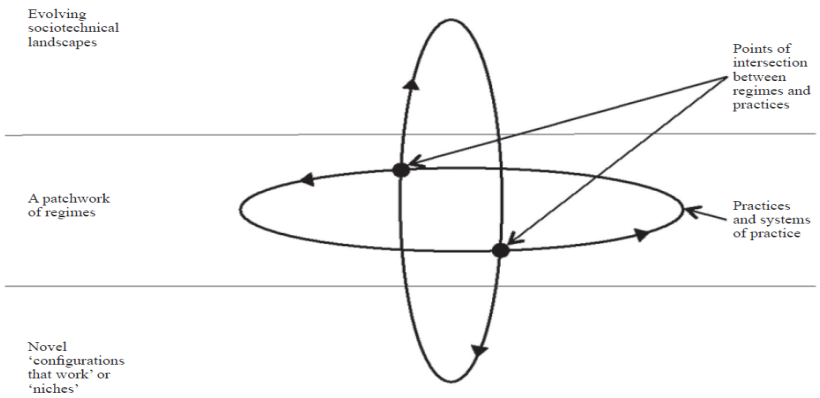

FIGURE 2: CRITICAL NODES OF INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN PRACTICES AND REGIMES (HARGREAVES, ET AL., 2013)

In this research, we analyse the nine marketing functions as different practices. We will do this from a niche perspective. We analyse each function from the combined MLP/SPT framework. To do this , we use these theories as analytical tools, where on the one hand the SPT is helpful to unravel the different practices, their elements and the ways in which they were performed by *Voedselteams.* At the same time, adding the perspective of the MLP allows us to identify the interactions between the different analytical levels and, as we will see later, shows that the niche and regime interact in many more ways than would be expected in a first instance.

3. Material and methods

3.1 Interviews & choice of interviewees

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight key actors internal and external to *Voedselteams* (coordinators, logistical planner, farmer and external experts). The interviews took between 45 minutes to three hours. All the questions were open-ended and each interview built forth on the previous one. As much knowledge was already available, the interviews were held in order to satiate our knowledge. Therefore, not a large number of interviewees was needed. To select the interviewees a mix of snowball sampling and expert sampling was used. To select the interviewees internal to *Voedselteams*, we started with two interviewees. From there we identified further possible interviewees together with our interviewees. For the expert sampling we identified those interviewees with specific knowledge on particular topics. For each of the interviewees anonymity was guarded, therefore, each interview is referred to with a code. A list with the codes can be found in Appendix A. Next to this, 34 interviews with team and depot coordinators were held in the context of another project, Food4Sustainability. Some of these interviews were also coded and incorporated in the results of this report.

3.2 Participant observation

Participant observation was also used. First, we attended the general assembly on the 12th of March, 2016. Attending this event allowed us to grasp more broadly the issues that *Voedselteams* is coping with. We also presented the preliminary results of the research. This allowed members, farmers and coordinators to directly react to the outcomes found until that moment. Moreover, a list was handed out that allowed the attendants to give anonymous and written feedback, providing us with further input for the research.

Second, we became a member of a local food team in order to experience the practical reality of being a *Voedselteam* member. This experience allowed us to understand more thoroughly the way in which a team works.

4. Results

4.1 Voedselteams: a short history

Voedselteams were started in 1996 in Leuven, Belgium, by several individuals working in three non-profit organizations: an educational organization (*Elcker-Ick*), a NGO focusing on food security (*Wervel)* and a NGO that was concerned with sustainable agriculture in the South (*Vredeseilanden*). They were concerned about the effects of globalization on agricultural issues (Hubeau, et al., 2015; Crivits & Paredis, 2013). *Voedselteams* found the inspiration for its model in the Japanese *Seikatsu*, a group in which consumer teams are central in the organization of food purchase and storage.

In 1996, *Voedselteams* started a one-year trial period. The NGOs that were mentioned earlier provided administrative and promotional support in this. During the trial, consumers sought contact with local farmers and spaces to set up depots. The depot of a team is the space where the produce for each of the teams is delivered. Mostly, this is a space that is made available by one of the team members, but it can also be a school, a church or any other suitable space. The model turned out to be a success, therefore more teams were added and the model grew. The Belgian food crises in 1999 and 2003 led to an increased participation. Nowadays, the organization consists of around 175 teams in five Flemish provinces.

The teams are consumer teams that consist of at least twelve households and generally not more than thirty. These teams organize their food purchase and delivery together. They share common values, but each have a specific way of functioning. Generally, tasks within the food teams are performed by volunteers. Each team has a general coordinator, a depot coordinator

and a financial coordinator. Each member can order food according to his/her needs (Voedselteams, 2015; Crivits & Paredis, 2013).

In 2001, the organization was formalized as a Not for Profit Organization (NPO). The NPO hires five full-time equivalent (FTE) staff and provides general coordination as well as meeting educational and promotional goals. Furthermore, each of the five Flemish provinces has an own regional coordinator(s). These coordinators enact several tasks like: identifying and contacting potential new producers and shops, assisting initiation of new teams, maintaining the websites, etcetera. Employees are mainly paid with subsidies from national and European grants. These grants are obtained because of the official status of *Voedselteams* as a social-cultural movement, that the organization has since 2005 (Voedselteams-1, 2016).

4.2 Marketing functions

In Appendix B the nine marketing functions as they are performed by *Voedselteams* are described according to the framework by Crivits & Paredis (2013) (See figure 1). In this article, we pay more in-depth attention to four functions (buying/selling, storing, transportation, financing/risk bearing) to demonstrate the way in which the nine marketing functions can be analysed through a combined MLP/SPT framework, and the added value of doing so. The different elements of each of the practices will be discussed in the order of their relative importance. Moreover, those elements that are redundant for this paper will not be discussed.

4.2.1 Buying/Selling

Within *Voedselteams*, the processes of buying and selling are strongly entangled. We have therefore taken the two practices together.

Agency

Ordering

The buying and selling process is similar in all the regions. Orders are made on a weekly basis through the web shop before Thursday evening for the consecutive week. The order is delivered on a fixed time and location each week, except for meat, which is delivered approximately once every month. There are differences in terms of continuity and amount of produce that is being bought. Some teams and regions require their members to order a consistent and minimum amount of produce, but most have not set such a requirement.

Paying

Generally, payments for the produce are made weekly after the delivery. The way in which payments are made is different in the various regions. The most common strategy is that each

food team has an own bank account to which members transfer their payments (Voedselteams, 2015; Voedselteams-1, 2016). During the participatory observation it was found that members calculate the money due for all produce themselves, except for meat, fish, and missing deliveries based on the confirmation e-mail of each order. Payments for meat and fish are made separately because weights may differ from the ordered quantity. The financial responsible of the team then transfers this money to the different producers.

In Limburg, because of the outsourcing of the transport, the logistical company has to own the products at the moment of transportation. Therefore, the intermediary organization buys the products from the individual producers. The individual members of the food teams then pay the logistical company directly, instead of moving through a team account and a financial responsible (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016).

Decision making on supply

Decisions on the supply of *Voedselteams* are made on the basis of what can be offered. The most important criteria are whether a product is local and organic. Next to this, for each product group, only one producer can offer his produce per team. For example, there will only be one farm that offers vegetables, and only one producer of beef per team. The decision on which producer will deliver to which team is made on a per team basis (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-3, 2016; Voedselteams-4, 2016).

Price setting

Within *Voedselteams,* farmers are price setters. The price is based on the real costs of products. However, producers are often not aware of their real costs. Therefore:

> "*In our system, it is not being said, but it is true, you can say that they will look at organic or local prices, instead of looking at actual costs. In theory they are price setters, but in practice they look at the price and they follow* (Voedselteams-2, 2016)*."*

However, price elasticity of demand in *Voedselteams* is low.

> *"Voedselteams people will not claim lower prices. They know that farmers get a good price and we should not make our farmers poorer* (Voedselteams-3, 2016)*".*

Therefore, farmers generally receive a higher price than they would at auctions (Voedselteams-3, 2016). Recently, the umbrella organization started making an effort to help farmers create their prices based on a cost and income calculation.

Costs for logistics and commercialization are added to the price that consumers pay. As this system is dependent on the region, the percentage calculated is also different for each of the regions, ranging from 17% in the region of East-Flanders, to 20-25% in the regions of Vlaams-Brabant and Limburg. Next to this, 6% of the initial price of the product is calculated as a

solidarity payment from the farmers to the organization. However, this cost is often passed on to consumers as many farmers take this into account when calculating their price (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-5, 2016).

Boundary constraints

There is a tension that stems from the seasonality and locality of products. During winter, it is not possible to provide *Voedselteams* consumers with a varied offer. Moreover, many consumers like to order exotic products like pineapples, chocolate or coffee through *Voedselteams*. Therefore, international products are offered, provided that they are organic and fair trade (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-3, 2016; Voedselteams-4, 2016; Voedselteams-5, 2016).

Furthermore, because of the time-span between order and delivery, buying through *Voedselteams* asks for thinking ahead. Moreover, the fact that the picking up of the produce happens every week at the same time and same place might especially be a constraint for consumers without flexible agendas (Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-3, 2016; Voedselteams-4, 2016).

Another constraint is that in many regions, consumers are not asked to place a minimum order each week. This makes it hard for *Voedselteams* producers to predict how much they will be selling each week.

Lastly, the selling process of *Voedselteams* is strongly based on the voluntary engagement of *Voedselteams* consumers. However, it is hard to find volunteers that are willing to engage (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-3, 2016; Expert-1, 2016).

Socio-cultural structure

During the field work, it seemed that there was a shared *Voedselteams* socio-cultural structure. Elements that were often mentioned were:

1. Establishing direct contact between producers and consumers;
2. Supporting local farmers and economies;
3. Increasing transparency in the food chain;
4. Creating social cohesion around food production and consumption;
5. Gaining access to healthy, local and fair food.

This is combined with the acceptance of higher prices that are being asked than those in the conventional system. Additionally, there is an underlying consent that food does not have to be available everywhere and all year round. Actually, the limited and seasonal availability of

food is argued to be of an advantage, as it reconnects members to the seasons, and it induces innovation and creativity in cooking practices (Crivits & Paredis, 2013).[4]

For consumers, generally the most important reason to join a food team is to gain access to healthy and local food while the coordinators often emphasized the importance of the social aspect of the teams.

Moreover, for the buying and selling processes specifically, it has been shown that discussions revolve constantly around the boundaries of locality. This discussion was found to be divided in two camps: those who are strongly in favour of the local character of *Voedselteams*, and those who think that international products can or should be offered. A regional difference can be noticed. For example, the strong dynamics that revolve around short food chains in Ghent makes that a certain hostility towards an increasing amount of 'non-local' produce can be noticed there:

> *"It is a discussion in our team. […] Olive oil, pasta, where does it stop. We are not a shop and I feel like we are moving towards that with our organization* (Voedselteams-5, 2016)*".*

Contrary to this, another regional coordinator mentioned:

> *"I am convinced, and many consumers with me, that if there is no local variant, we should be able to open up to import products* (Voedselteams-2, 2016)*."*

Critical points of intersection

The buying and selling practices of *Voedselteams* come into contact with regime practices at multiple instances. First, the engagement of *Voedselteams* consumers often seems to go hand in hand with a general distrust in the dominant food system. This effect was enforced during food scares which was illustrated by the rise of *Voedselteams* members during such times (e.g. the 1999 Dioxin crisis) (Voedselteams, 2015). Nevertheless, this effect only seemed to be temporary.

Second, once a consumer is a member of *Voedselteams*, it is expected that this person engages more strongly in his food buying practices by volunteering, and planning his other activities around the activity of food buying. In this sense, the idea of convenience as it is proposed in the conventional sector is challenged in *Voedselteams*. Moreover, the food buying and selling

[4] Nevertheless, there are strong personal, team and regional differences in the importance that is attributed to each of these aspects. For example, in East-Flanders Voedselteams members are quite strict about their values, while in other regions this is less the case. This strong engagement is explained by a strong presence of short food chains and sustainability initiatives in the cities in this region which provided Voedselteams with a network that it builds further on (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-3, 2016; Voedselteams-5, 2016).

practices become entangled with each other. An example of this is the fact that consumers calculate the price of their groceries themselves.

Third, *Voedselteams* consumers tend to accept constraints posed by seasonality and locality. Nevertheless, a change can be noticed in this. As the organization has continued to grow, in recent years, the offer of *Voedselteams* has been expanded with non-local and non-seasonal produce. The previous paragraph has shown that opinions on whether this is a good development or not differ.

Fourth, Dedeurwaerdere et al. (2015) notice: "*As long as the price of food does not reflect the negative environmental externalities of conventional farming, the growth and further development of the collective food buying groups will continue to depend strongly on the voluntary contributions of citizens and consumers* (p. 6)." Consumers that are potentially interested in *Voedselteams* might thus still choose convenience and the lowest prices available.

Finally, for the selling process in particular, it is especially the farmers that sell both through *Voedselteams* and through auctions that come into contact with the regime. In case a farmer has a contract with an auction, he is allowed to sell 5% on his farm. The rest should be sold to the auction. Although the auction does not check actively whether this rule is endorsed, it might be a potential risk for those who sell more than 5% of their produce through short food supply chains (Expert-1, 2016; Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016).

4.2.2 Storing

Material structure

Since its foundation, *Voedselteams* is characterized by its depot system. When a food team is started up, it has to look for a suitable place. This can be a garage, church, school, shop, or any other location that can fulfil the role of a storage place. The umbrella organization supports this, but the main engagement comes from the team members. When the members find a suitable depot, the organization will check whether the depots comply with the standards, e.g. the depot has to be easy to reach by consumers and transporters. Also, there needs to be electricity for a freezer and a fridge.

Agency

Normally, farmers bundle their orders per team. From the farmer, the produce is transported to the transporter. There the packages are prepared for each of the teams. The produce for the consumers is then divided in the depot by a volunteer.

The way in which the depots are managed differs. Some depots work with turns. In this way, all team members take on some of the volunteering responsibility. Other depots do not have a control system. This can lead to problems when a mistake is made in the delivery. The transporters control whether depots are being managed correctly or not. Problems (e.g., non-compliance with the cooling of products) are reported to the organization (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-4, 2016; Voedselteams-5, 2016).

Socio-cultural structure

The social function of the depots differs strongly. Some teams see the depots as a social place where they meet on a weekly basis. The organization also tends to put emphasis on this function. However, many consumers and coordinators acknowledged that by many the depot is merely seen as a pick-up point:

> *"I think most people don't actually see each other (…). they (…) take their package, sign and leave and they just meet a few times per year. [..] we should also be honest in that* (Voedselteams-4, 2016)*."*

Boundary constraints

The storing practice requires voluntary engagement. This may be a boundary to join *Voedselteams* or to more strongly engage. Also, because of the relatively narrow time span that a depot is open, members may have to adapt their schedule to pick up their produce (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-3, 2016; Voedselteams-4, 2016). Moreover, the professionality of the depots can also be a barrier as in some depots regulations around food safety are not always followed up (Expert-1, 2016).

Critical points of intersection

In a food team the storing practice is taken up by consumers whereas storing practices in the regime are highly specialized and professionalized. Moreover while supermarkets and retailers are rather standardized and sterile, *Voedselteams* depots can take many shapes and sizes. Ambiguity exists on whether this might become constraining in the future. Until now, the depots have fallen under a private and non-trade status, and therefore have escaped from constraints that would apply under strict readings of law (van Gameren, 2015). However as an expert mentioned:

> "*One can notice that they* [FASFC - Federal Agency for Safety of the Food Chain] *want more and more control over all those side forms of food provisioning that are not within the*

rules [..] it will not be so strict but it will push them for sure in a certain shape (Expert-1, 2016)*."*

An expert from the FASFC mentioned however:

"*It is something that we follow, because we now have a legal framework in which we try to fit existing initiatives, and then often we need to circulate clarifications, because the legal framework does not clarify how it should be applied to these new initiatives. (…) Anyway, our mission will remain to protect the consumer and guard food safety. Now, there is also a trend to support small producers, so I rather see it positively, I do not think we will become much stricter (…) but it is hard to predict (…)* we *adapt our policies to societal trends. If we see that something is a growing initiative that we have little control over, we do need to take our responsibilities and adapt the rules so that we have more control or security that the consumer is protected and is offered safe food* (Expert-2, 2016)*."*

Registering a depot would mean that it would have to keep up with the administration of the FASFC, have a control visit every four years, and pay an annual fee to the FASFC. It is highly likely that in this case the depot system would not keep on existing in the way it does today. Moreover, this would mean that the length of the supply chain would officially increase, as the depot would then be seen as a link in the food chain. Since the food safety risk in food chains is determined by its length, this would mean that the perceived risk of *Voedselteams* would increase. Farmers might then be assessed as more risky and they might have to live up to stricter rules and regulations (Expert-2, 2016).

4.2.3 Transportation

Agency

In its starting years *Voedselteams* was a small initiative. Therefore, farmers and consumers were taking up the responsibility of transporting and distributing the produce. As *Voedselteams* has grown, transportation methods have professionalized. This process has been different in each region, but largely there are three different systems:

1. In some regions, transportation has been **outsourced to an external firm**. This company puts together all orders in the region, picks them up from the farmers, and sorts everything by the usage of a pick-ordering system per food team. After that, the produce is transported to the teams. This is mostly done by companies from the social economy, as they are significantly cheaper compared to professional logistical companies. Routes are organized based on a combination

of efficiency and depot opening hours by a professional planner (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-4, 2016).

2. In other regions, the transportation system is organized through **collaborations between farmers**. At the start, these arrangements were informal and farmers received a fixed price per team. However, in time, many of them have been professionalized, and farmers are being paid on a per hour basis. The routes in these regions are organized by the regional coordinator and volunteers (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-5, 2016).
3. In a few regions, a system is still in place in which **farmers drive around the produce** themselves. The organization, however, realizes that in such a system unnecessary kilometres are driven. Therefore, they are in the process of organizing a similar system as in the regions described in point two (Voedselteams-1, 2016).

Material structure

Because of the highly diversified nature of this practice, the material and socio-cultural structure are different for each of the regions. The efficiency of the transportation system is dependent on some material factors like the centrality of the transportation facility and the density of the teams.

Socio-cultural structure

Because of the diversity of the transportation systems, the socio-cultural structure differs in the regions. In most interviews with coordinators emphasis was placed on the superiority of systems in which farmers work together.

In terms of attitudes towards mistakes, two different types of opinions could be distinguished. On the one hand, there was a certain acceptance:

> "*I think it does have charm as well. Sometimes it happens that something stays in the depot and then others buy it. And it makes you eat something you would normally never order, so you discover things by accident* (Voedselteams-5, 2016)*."*

On the other hand, some do not accept the mistakes and therefore quit their *Voedselteams*-membership. In the management of the organization these two different standpoints could also be distinguished. On the one hand, a coordinator mentioned:

> "*They remain consumers. So like, "I pay for this and I want it to be good, and if I get a rotten pumpkin I am not happy". And I think that the pioneers of back in the days thought it was*

ok, if the farmer could explain and if he gave something in return the next time. That has stopped, that is a serious change I think (Voedselteams-1, 2016)*".*

On the contrary, another coordinator mentioned:

"*Distribution, logistics and commercialization need to be as good as conventional retail, because you cannot make mistakes, because people will leave and they are right. And conventional retail is so well organized, so we don't manage to have that professionality, but we should* (Voedselteams-3, 2016)*."*

Critical points of intersection

As was explained before, an evolution can be noticed in the way in which transport has been organized. While in the beginning transportation was organized by producers and consumers, the expansion of the organization has led to professionalization of the transportation system. This has thus led to a stronger specialization within the division of labour of *Voedselteams*. Next to this, it has led to an increasing amount of rules and regulations that apply to the transportation system. Nevertheless, as the transportation is organized differently per region, rules also differ.

4.2.4 Financing and risk bearing

During this research we found that within *Voedselteams,* the practices of financing and risk bearing are strongly intertwined. Therefore, we analysed them together.

Agency

By allowing farmers to set their own prices, *Voedselteams* offers its farmers a stable price, and therefore decreases market risks. This is a significant benefit as price fluctuation is one of the most important risks for farmers (Voedselteams-3, 2016). Market risks are also decreased because of the small number of links between producers and consumers, which makes that information flows more easily, and the market is less influenced by global or even national factors.

Farmers have a production peak in summer, while orders decrease significantly during this time. To counter the risks that this poses for farmers, the project of Solid Food was developed. In this project, contracts were made between teams and farmers, in which consumers engaged to order a minimum amount of produce throughout the year. In practice, this was a difficult concept and proved unsuccessful.

A more successful project dealing with this issue was set up in the region of West-Flanders where year round memberships now provide farmers in the region with stable and predictable sales.

Moreover, in most regions a minimum order per week per team is now required:

> "*We have to move somewhere and help the producers. They (the farmers) asked to please start with a minimum order, because they have to spend as much time on an order of 3 euros as an order of 30 euros* (Voedselteams-4, 2016)*."*

Socio-cultural structure

Underlying the fact that *Voedselteams* engages in the risk bearing of the market prices of farmers is the fact that one of the goals of the organization and its members is to support local farmers and local economies. *Voedselteams* members are willing to pay higher prices than they would in the conventional sector. Nevertheless, the importance that members attribute to the financing and risk bearing of farmers differs. Some members viewed the fact that *Voedselteams* does not engage to a large extent in financing and risk-bearing as a serious problem, while others did not consider it a necessity to engage in this.

Boundary constraints

There is not enough capacity of the employees to engage in this practice. Instead, some of the other practices have gained priority at the moment, like the development of the web shop and the professionalization of the commercial aspects and logistics (Voedselteams-1, 2016; Voedselteams-2, 2016; Voedselteams-3, 2016; Voedselteams-4, 2016).

5. Discussion

The results show in a first place that in short food supply chains, like in conventional food supply chains, the nine marketing functions need to be fulfilled. Yet, within the niche, these practices are reassembled by changing the connections between agency, material and socio-cultural structure. In general it seems that in the niche specialisation is lower than in the dominant food system, as most tasks are performed by producers or consumers themselves. For example, in the payment system, more agency is expected from the consumers' side by calculating his/her own costs for each week. In this sense, these functions also seem to be more connected to each other in the niche, as is shown for example by the fact that buying and selling cannot be seen as separate practices as they are strongly entangled.

Yet, we noticed a fluctuation over time. In the starting days of *Voedselteams*, most of the practices were reassembled in such a way that they were performed by producers and

consumers, thereby eliminating all middlemen from the marketing process. However, as *Voedselteams* started to grow, this has changed. The transportation system, for example, has been taken over by professionals in many of the regions. Hence, as an initiative grows in time, certain 'regime elements' might be brought back in the organisation of the marketing functions and the degree of specialisation in the marketing process may be increased. Moreover, as a niche-initiative grows, there may be more points of intersection between niches and regimes. For example, the growth of SFSCs in Flanders has increased their visibility for the Federal Agency for Safety of the Food Chain. In the future this may have large consequences for the way in which *Voedselteams* performs its storing practice in the future. Such an analysis, then, shows the added value of identifying critical points of intersection between niches.

Differences between the niche and the regime can also be identified in the socio-cultural structure. For example, in *Voedselteams* ideas of convenience and normality of the dominant food system are being challenged. This can be seen for example in the fact that *Voedselteams* consumers are involved in many of the marketing functions, thereby showing a stronger engagement in their food provisioning. Another example is the way in which the depots of *Voedselteams* challenge the ideas of what a 'normal' food storage and buying place should look like and how and by whom it should be managed. It was also found however, that the socio-cultural structure too is subject to change. In all the functions it could be noticed that there is a division between those members and coordinators that argue for a *Voedselteams* that holds on strongly to its initial values, versus those who argue to offer a broader model and more convenience as to attract more people.

The examples above thus show that as a niche initiative grows, some of the marketing functions may re-adopt regime elements, while other functions remain 'pure' niche practices. Hence, hybrids are created between niches and regimes. It is thus not only the niche that influences the regime in a transition towards sustainability, but that also the regime influences how practices are fulfilled in the niche. The question then may be asked whether this represents a regime lock-in and decreases the transformative capacity of *Voedselteams,* or whether instead, it increases the transformative capacity of the initiative as more people may be reached.

Second, the approach shows that no homogeneous *Voedselteams* practice exists. Some of the functions are performed more or less homogeneously (like buying and selling), while other practices are strongly differentiated per team, individual, farmer or region (like financing and processing). This is also the case for the different socio-cultural structures of the practices. Even though it was found that an overarching socio-cultural structure of *Voedselteams* does exist, different social dynamics characterise each of the regions and teams. The socio-cultural

structure of practices might have an influence on the way in which certain practices are performed. For example, in East-Flanders, there are strong dynamics around short and alternative food chains. This influences the agency of the individuals operating in the food team, leading to a stronger dynamic in the teams than in some of the other regions. The same point is shown by the fact that on the one hand, *Voedselteams* is strongly aiming for the creation of social structures around the topic of food. This is connected to the large responsibility that is directed to volunteers within *Voedselteams.* However, many of the consumers join *Voedselteams* in order to gain access to local, seasonal and healthy food, without wanting to become part of a social movement. Consequently, it was found that the willingness to engage from consumers is rather limited. Thus, there seems to be a discrepancy between the goals of the organization, and the reasons that many of the consumers join a team. These differences show that practices in niches are rather flexible and allow space for diversity, experimentation and fluctuation.

Lastly, the descriptions above show the added value of the analysis of the marking function framework through an MLP/SPT perspective as it allows to point out which functions get a strong attention (like buying, selling and storing) and which functions do not (like financing and risk management). Moreover, it allows to show how some of the functions are strongly connected to each other, while others are not so much. For example, it allows us to see how rules and regulations around transportation have influenced agency in the buying and selling practices of *Voedselteams*. In this way, the overall (socio-economic) sustainability of an initiative can be analysed holistically, instead of the sustainability of one function without taking into account the effects of one function on another.

6. **Conclusion**

In this article, we looked at the case of *Voedselteams* as a niche that has come up as a reaction to persistent problems in our food system. We researched how *Voedselteams* performs the nine marketing functions through a combined MLP/SPT perspective. This approach has shown us how middlemen have been largely eliminated from the marking practices of this niche. Instead, the marketing functions are performed by consumers and the producers. In this way engagement of consumers in the food system is increased and ownership of farmers is increased.

The marketing functions approach also shows that in a more mature, or up scaled initiative like *Voedselteams*, some regime elements may be taken back up in the marketing functions by middlemen. The transportation system is an example of this. This in turn, may mean that a

larger segment of society is reached. However, it also means that the small scale and the direct contact between producers and consumers is compromised. Using the marketing functions to describe the practices of both initiatives also helps to point out strong and weak or blind spots in the marketing model.

Voedselteams may provide an inspiring alternative to the regime. This may also foster change the regime itself. It could be argued that this change is already taking place as conventional players also offer organic and sustainable products. However, whether this change will continue and be incremental or radical remains to be seen.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Function interviewee	Date	Duration	Code
Coordinator	13-01-2016	2h	Voedselteams-1
Coordinator	18-01-2016	2h	Voedselteams-2
Coordinator	08-02-2016	1,5h	Voedselteams-3
Coordinator and member	01-03-2016	2h	Voedselteams-4
Regional Coordinator	01-03-2016	1,5h	Voedselteams-5
Team responsible and depot holder	20-03-2015	1h	Voedselteams-6
Team responsible	14-03-2015	1h	Voedselteams-7
Team responsible	02-04-2015	1h	Voedselteams-8
Team responsible	14-04-2015	1h	Voedselteams-9
Expert SFSCs	02-03-2016	1h	Expert-1
Farmer	03-03-2016	3h	Farmer-1
Expert food safety in SFSCs FASFC	27-04-2016	45 min	Expert-2

Appendix B

	Agency	Material structure	Socio-cultural structure	Other elements
General	• Member's responsibility to start new team • Meeting with the regional coordinator for the start-up • New member joins through personal contact or through the website. • Take-in: explanation of team and final registration • Farmers differentiated according to products, scale, importance of VT • Decision of entering based on farm visit and screening • Different motivations to join for farmers	• Website • Webshop • Newsletter • Magazine • Office	• Establishing direct contact between producers and consumers • Supporting local farmers and economies • Increasing transparency in the food chain • Creating social cohesion around food • Gaining access to healthy, local and fair food • Acceptance of higher prices than in conventional system • Food does not have to be available everywhere all year round	• Lack of man power → reliance on volunteers
Buying and selling	• Weekly orders & delivery on fixed time and location • Differentiation in continuity and amount of orders • Weekly payments after delivery • Differentiated payment methods	• Internet • Webshop • Ordering list • Bank account	• Discussions on boundaries of locality • Local character vs. international sourcing if product is not available	• Tension seasonality and locality → add foreign products • Fixed schedule is barrier for consumers with flexible agendas • No minimum order = disadvantage for producers

	• Decision on supply based on offer. Criteria: local and organic (if possible) • Farmers are price setters. Price = real costs + costs logistics and commercialization + 6% solidarity payment			• Difficulties attracting new members • Strongly based on voluntary labor. • Low prices in the regime are disadvantage
Storing	• Members look for suitable depot • Farmers bundle orders per team. • Produce is transported to the transporter. • Transporter prepares packages per team • Depot volunteer prepares packages per consumer • Transporters control management of depot	• Depot • Electricity • Freezer • Refrigerator	• social function of the depots differs strongly: social place vs. pick up point	• Strong voluntary engagement required • Narrow opening hours • Consumer takes up storing practice (vs. very standardized practice in regime) • Possible changes in regulations in the future might become inhibiting
Transportation	• Differentiation in transportation methods: • Outsourced to an external firm. • Organization through collaborations between farmers. • Farmers drive around the produce themselves.	• Diversified because of diversified practice • Centrality of transportation facility • Density of teams	• Two attitudes towards mistakes: Mistakes as charming element vs. no acceptance towards mistakes	• Regular mistakes in deliveries put pressure on employees and volunteers • Evolution in organization transport: expansion led to professionalization and thus specialization in division of labour

Processing	• Increasing offer of processed products • Diversified practice • Rule of thumb for choosing products: local and organic if possible	• Material structure dependent on actors and products.	• Preference for primary local products vs. acceptance of foreign products if no alternative	• Not everything available locally → offer of international and non-organic products
Standardization	• Organic label is reference • Introduction of Participatory Guarantee System • Farm visits • List of questions to foster discussion • No standardization of shape, size or colour	• Question list	• System based on trust and case-specific characteristics • Encouragement towards sustainability • Inclusion of economic and social sustainability • Increase consumer-producer interaction through deliberation	• Impossible to check foreign producers • Contrary to regime standardization based on trust, transparency and direct contact between producers and consumers

Financing and risk bearing	• Farmers are price setters → stable prices → decreased market risk • Small n° of links → decreased market risk • Decreased demand in summer but peak production increases risks for farmers • West Flanders: vegetable membership to decrease this risk • Some regions: minimum order		• Support local farmers and local economies • Willingness to pay higher prices to decrease market risk • Differences in importance attributed to further engagement in financing and risk management	• Low capacity to further engage in this practice
Marketing intelligence	• Most communication through website and web shop • Sporadic organization of events • Promotion through mouth to mouth communication • No gathering of external developments or wishes of consumers • Consumers can ventilate opinion in general assemblies • No circulation of prices and way prices are built up	• Web site • Web shop (only accessible for members)	• Stronger focus on producer well-being than on consumer well-being • Stronger focus on awareness raising than on meeting wishes of consumers.	• Difficulties including lower socio-economic classes and immigrants • No information sought about these groups • Lack in man-power and skills to engage in this practice • Increased amount of initiatives and increased engagement of regime are potential threat