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## The Social Process of Defining Quality Food, Based on the Opinions of Polish Consumer Cooperative Members

**Abstract:** This article describes how members of consumer cooperatives define quality food. Cooperatives are seen as one of the forms of Alternative Food Networks. The concept of quality food is defined subjectively. The analysis presented in the paper is based on the results of a questionnaire conducted in winter 2015/2016 among members of consumer cooperatives in Poland. The spontaneously made three main associations with the notion of "high quality food" indicate that customers consider qualities that are the result of the ways and methods of production. Food quality and safety are the results of individual and organisational trust and mutual relations, among consumers themselves as well as between consumers and producers. In the case of mass-produced food, issues of safety have become crucial: for the indicated group food safety means shifting from the rules of the "industrial world" to the rules of the "domestic world" where safety is the result of trust, direct consumer/supplier relations, and/or traditions rather than standardised norms.

**Key words:** food quality, alternative food networks, cooperatives.

### 1. Introduction

The concept of quality food is defined subjectively. The way it is defined depends on who defines it and in what context. Generally, quality food has positive connotations and is often associated with special methods of production and processing. Quality food is often opposed to food produced on a mass scale and considered healthier and better – but also more expensive. A debate about quality food refers to crucial issues of the preferred model of agriculture – large corporate farms owned by multinational corporations, or smaller family farms. This is related to the problem of methods of food processing and consumer choice between

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industrially produced food or food produced in small, local facilities. The issue of quality food is also a matter of access to quality food by various social groups and methods of food distribution. All these issues are associated with a policy shift in the European Union, that, for the first time, “position food and farming at the service of wider regional development, environmental and public health objectives” (Sage 2003, p. 4). The sociology of food is gaining popularity, including in Poland (see Domański et al. 2015), as it relates to such important issues from the point of view of the study of society: social structure, lifestyles, and hierarchies of values. This article refers to an important problems from the point of view of food sociology as it refers to the issue of how the group of people that are recognized as active consumers define the notion “quality food” and what this might mean for the “average” consumer. At the same time it focuses on the relations between small scale producers and consumers.

The general purpose of this article is to demonstrate how a specific group of consumers, namely members of food cooperatives, defines food quality. The group’s outlook on this complex concept is especially worth considering. Although it represents a sparse perspective, it will be argued throughout the article, that cooperative members have the power to change views on food products and the ways of production and distribution. At the same time they may undermine the existing authorities who speak on behalf of food consumers. Consumer cooperatives may be described as carriers of social change, where the term “change” refers to improvement of food quality and its accessibility to a wide range of consumers through i.e., reducing the number of intermediaries between the producer and the consumer, as well as improving the quality of life of small farmers by supporting their multifunctionality. One of the origins of various forms of Alternative Food Networks (food cooperatives, farmer markets, community supported agriculture, etc.) is the crisis of the global food system caused by both external factors (e.g., climate change, shortfall of energy supplies) and internal ones (e.g., contribution to the environmental crisis, decrease in food safety). Growing demand for sustainable food regime can only be achieved by preventive measures, such as sustainable consumption (Fonte 2013). The rise of consumer cooperatives as a type of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) paves the way to transition toward a more sustainable food system and just economy. Since the conventional food system is eroding, the trust in conventional products is breached, and new social movements related with food take active part in the requalification process. In both Europe and the US the number of consumers concerned with food quality and the origin or the provenance of food products has been constantly increasing over the past 10–20 years (Goszczyński 2014).

In the first part of the article the Author describes what the consumer cooperatives are. In the second part she presents a theoretical approach to defining food quality. The third part consist of results of the research conducted among members of Polish food cooperatives. The last part is a discussion regarding the role of members of consumer cooperatives in creating new attitudes toward the understanding of quality food.

## **2. Consumer cooperatives as the “Wind of Change”**

The term “Alternative Food Networks” (AFNs) was coined early in this century (Goodman 2004; Marsden 2004). AFN is a broad term encompassing many innovative initiatives of varying scale and character, connected by the aim to build an alternative to globalised industrial food production and distribution. Cooperatives seen as forms of Alternative Food Networks are gaining popularity in urban areas (Jarosz 2008). Based on the simple idea of establishing direct links between organised groups of consumers and producers, they are described as “institutionalised forms of interaction established between both consumers and farmers” (Jaklin, Kummer, Milestad 2015, p. 44). Cooperatives were supposed to empower ordinary people by establishing enterprises owned and democratically governed by the members (Restakis 2010).

The people involved in consumer cooperatives might be considered individuals with deeper knowledge regarding food and with a deeper understanding of the process of production and consumption. Goodman describes members of consumer cooperatives as affluent or discerning (Goodman 2004). Through direct and regular relations between producers and consumers, the latter are provided with information about the products, such as place of production, methods of production and so on, and the former receive immediate evaluation of their products. Food products traded in consumer cooperatives often don't meet official food safety regulations, as cooperative members claim that part of the official rules regarding food production and distribution are unproportional to the risk involved (Sage 2003). Instead, the producers and buyers co-establish their own rules. The quoted author indicates that responsibility for safety is shared among all the actors of the network. It means that food-cooperative members undermine institutional trust, and mistrust institutional arrangements and formal rules. Instead, organisational trust is strengthened: this means the trustor places trust in an organisation, which results from the ability, benevolence, and integrity of an organisation. The strength of cooperatives flows also from mutual and individual trust and mutual acquaintance (Yu Wang et al. 2015).

The way consumers organise within food-cooperatives is often seen as a major social innovation (Jaklin, Kummer, Milestad 2015; Goszczyński 2015). Subjectivity

of cooperation members as consumers is put into focus. “They are not rational consumers, satisfying their individual needs through market mechanisms... they are also not slaves to institutionalised determinism... defining available resources as well as patterns of what and how we may consume.” (Goszczyński 2015, p. 222). In the course of cooperative activity, food receives a new value – it is more than just a means of satisfying hunger or whims; it is a conscious group action of purchasing quality healthy food while increasing the added value of small farmers and food producers.

“Consumer cooperatives may be viewed as a form of new social movement, whose primary aim is to provide an alternative to previously acclaimed cultural patterns such as unlimited consumption or orientation towards individualism.” (Bilewicz, Potkańska 2014, p. 28). An important aspect here, from the point of view of the subject matter of this article, is that new social movements are perceived as “laboratories” in which more durable forms of social life are created. In the case of food quality, the role of such a social movement is to suggest and show new dimensions of food quality. Consumer cooperatives can also be viewed as a form of informal initiatives of social economy.

Consumer cooperatives may further be considered a part of alternative consumption practices. Sassatelli sees them as “indicators of quiet, slow cultural revolution” (Sassatelli 2004, p. 182) The alternative consumption practices and discourses have power to affect conventional discourses. It is yet unclear to what extent consumer cooperatives have to challenge the main discourse regarding food quality and methods of food production. As there is shortage of research regarding nutrition behaviour among Poles (see excerpt CBOS 115/2014, Leszczyńska et al. 2015), we might only forecast the shift in attitudes against the logic of mass food provisioning. Growing number of stores selling organic food, availability of goods described as *local* or *directly from the farmer* in big supermarkets proves the change of the attitude toward food provision and food quality. However, the price is still the most decisive factor in purchase decision (see CBOS report 115/2014).

### 3. Polish consumer cooperatives

First consumer cooperatives appeared in Poland around the year 2010. Since then there have been over 30 attempts to establish cooperatives all over Poland. In 2016, only around 15 cooperatives have been functioning regularly, most of them in Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, and in other big cities. Consumer cooperatives are usually small (between 30–250 people), informal groups with a structure and ideology similar to the Western “new cooperativism” movement (Vieta 2010). However, some of the cooperatives refer also to the tradition of the pre-war cooperative movement

(*spółdzielczość*). Because they bypass middlemen, are based solely on volunteer work, they can keep the prices of high quality food lower than in stores. As research shows (see Bilewicz, Potkańska 2014; Bilewicz, Śpiewak 2015), disappointment with the hegemonic food system is a major motive for consumer cooperative membership all over Europe, including Poland. There are also more particular reasons behind joining the cooperatives as an access to quality food for lower prices and a particular lifestyle, where health and environmental issues play an important role.

In Poland, as in many Western countries, commercial initiatives have been developing for some time already (e.g., Lokalny Rolnik [Local Farmer], Rano Zebrano [Fresh from the Field]<sup>1</sup>), whose purpose is also to shorten the supply chain and provide city dwellers with quality food. In this case, the main goal for the consumer is to buy high quality food in the most convenient way: the food is delivered directly to homes or at pick-up points. Contrary to cooperatives, these initiatives are profit-oriented.

#### **4. The concept of Food Quality**

A general analysis of the methods of defining food quality in various sciences is the starting point for the study of the concept of quality food. The analysis makes it possible to capture those elements that allow gradation of quality and identification of what exactly quality food means.

Food quality is a relative concept with many meanings. There is no fixed definition; it changes from one social context to another, depending on who defines it. Each individual in the supply chain evaluate quality in slightly different terms. The retailer will focus more on visual attributes, while government officials will underline issues dedicated to health and safety. Consumers point to freshness, nutritional value and taste.

Every science defines the concept of quality food in a different manner. It is seen differently from the point of view of the theory of management and economics, just as the natural sciences and food safety theories present a different approach. Other aspects are emphasized in sociological theories. The following table is a brief summary of different approaches to defining the quality of food (cf. Table 1).

Quality food defined from the point of view of economic theory or management takes into account issues such as: management usefulness, measurement, and generability. Definitions formed from the point of view of natural sciences relate to the production methods, nutritional quality, food safety and sensory arguments. Definitions formed from the sociological perspective emphasize the social

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lokalnyrolnik.pl/>, <https://ranozebrano.pl/>.

**Table 1.** The concept of food quality in different theories

Food quality defined from the perspective of economics or management theory (Reeves, Bednar 1994)	Quality as an excellence – quality is achieving the highest standards Quality as a value – best for certain customer conditions Quality is conformance to specification Quality is meeting customers' expectations
Food quality defined from the point of view of the natural sciences and food safety theories (Kwasek 2011)	the degree of health, sensory appeal and visibility, durability, ease of preparation, and materials, technology used in the preparation and the price of the product
Food quality defined from the viewpoint of socio-psychology (Cardello 1995, p. 164)	"acceptance of the perceived characteristics of a product by consumers who are the regular users of the product category or those who comprise the target market"

Source: own analysis based on: Reeves, Bednar 1994; Kwasek 2011; Cardello 1995.

construction of quality, so they refer to the situation where the concept is constantly being developed in social relations, depending on external conditions. In order to assess the notion of food quality one should not focus on one quality requirement, but see them as elements of more complex design. Peri's model (Peri 2006) tries to combine the sociological perspective with psychological and economical ones. He proposes defining food quality through thirteen consumer requirements. Peri divides the requirements into two parts that are important from the consumers' as well as customers' point of view. The latter one represents the economic perspective whilst the former one derives from the desire and psychological needs. This way of defining the notion of food quality was the basis for the analysis conducted in this article (cf. Table 2).

He claims that since quality perception changes dynamically, the analytical model needs to be complemented by the dynamic model which is described as a circuit going from consumers to producers and the other way round. Both consumers and producers might change their assessment of what quality means in the process of interaction with other consumers and producers.

The characteristics of a given product has to be separated from its performance (e.g. aesthetic performance, safety performance, ethical performance). The second category is subjective and exists only in the interaction between a product and a consumer. It comprises elements such as sensory, aesthetic, and psychological data (Peri 2006). The basic issue, crucial for understanding food quality, is that of the consumer's views, not those of the experts or technicians, as has been the norm for a long time. As Cardello stresses, the latter cannot serve as arbiters for what we usually understand under the notion of food quality. What counts is perception

**Table 2.** An analytical model of food quality

The product as food (homo edens – consumer)	Product requirements (what)	Safety requirements Conformity to commodity standards Nutritional requirements Sensory requirements
	Psychological requirements (where and how)	Requirements concerning the production context Ethical requirements
The product as an object of trade (homo oeconomicus – customer)	Guarantee requirements (who)	Certification Traceability
	Requirements of the product/ packaging system	Functional and aesthetic requirements of packaging
	Requirements of the product/ packaging system	Information requirements Convenience
	Requirement of the product/ market system	Availability Price

Source: Peri 2006, p. 6.

of various elements such as nutrient content, perceived safety, as opposed to the elements that can be measured from the physical or biological point of view. In order to grasp what food quality is, the context in which food is eaten and bought also has to be considered. “The paradigm shift to a consumer-based definition of food quality moves its measurement from the physical to psychological dimension” (Cardello 1995, p. 164). This means that food quality is not an inherent characteristic of the food itself anymore, but is created through social relations.

Gronow and Warde (2001) propose the term “ordinary consumption” to describe consumer behaviour where choices are taken for granted and connected with the trust in conventional production. Recently, when the confidence in conventional food production has been breached, the requalification process requires new assessments and judgments. In this process, an important role is played by various social movements such as environmental groups and food cooperatives. They take an active role in the requalification process. Social movements encourage customers to focus more on various dimension of quality and become more active and aware consumers.

AFNs are a perfect example of how the notion of quality is created in relations between consumers and producers. Thanks to direct contacts between producers and consumers, the latter may learn what quality is or which elements of quality

are vital to the buyers, thanks to which they can see whether the quality of their products needs improvement. The way the quality food within AFN is defined results from the context in which food is purchased and the relationship between the buyer and the producer. While in the context of mainstream food industry and state regulatory agencies quality has been synonymous with safety, within AFNs different notions of quality are stressed. According to Sage AFN associates the notion of quality with embodied characteristics of the product – taste, appearance, and so on. It has to be stressed, however, that the most important issue in assessing food quality is transparency. The criterion is met by schemes to assure quality, provenance and traceability, and forms of direct marketing (Goodman 2004). The issues of ethics (both respect for the right of workers and animals) and justice are also taken into consideration in defining the food quality by the coop members.

Within AFNs there are two categories of quality definitions (Marsden 2004). The first stresses the link between the quality of the product and place of production or location of producers. The second group links food production and consumption with bio-processes like organic or integrated production. It includes both food with certificates and food that only claims being natural. Marsden calls the first type regional-artisanal and the second ecological-natural (Marsden 2004, p. 135). In reality, establishing clear divisions between these categories is difficult.

## 5. Empirical Analysis

The analysis presented below is based on the results of a questionnaire developed and later conducted by the Author<sup>2</sup> among members of consumer cooperatives in Poland. The questionnaire was distributed during the Fourth Assembly of Food Coops in October 2015 (half of all the questionnaires were returned) as well as through e-mail via the national cooperative fan page on Facebook. The questionnaire covered a wide range of topics, starting with the motivation behind joining a cooperative, through social characteristics of cooperatives, ending with issues of food quality, locality, and a range of factors contributing to the purchases of specific products within a given network. In total, between October 10, 2015 (cooperative assembly) and January 10, 2016, a total of 172<sup>3</sup> questionnaire responses were collected. Additional element of the study was participant observation.

The participants were relatively young, their average age being 33, and well-educated, with only 9% holding secondary education certificates and the rest at least a bachelor's degree. Members of consumer cooperatives feature a higher level

<sup>2</sup> The research was done along with Aleksandra Bilewicz, PhD.

<sup>3</sup> Because this is largely an informal movement, it is hard to assess the precise number of its members, as it is in flux, however, it is estimated at 1,100 members all around Poland.

of generalised trust, compared to average Pole – 56% of them indicated that in general they trusted the majority of people, while 23% the surveyed population agree with this opinion (CBOS 18/2016). Among the 172 people who filled out the questionnaire, 147 were women.<sup>4</sup> The group was relatively wealthy – 33% of the researched group declared that their net household income per capita exceeded PLN 3,000 and for 39% it was between PLN 1,401–3,000.<sup>5</sup> Every second person did their shopping in the cooperative every week<sup>6</sup>, and 31% at least once a month.

The starting point for questions related to defining food quality focused on three dimensions: local provenance, environmental qualities, and social significance – as in the research by Murdoch and Miele (2004). The Author has decided on these dimensions as they are the foundation for the idea of Alternative Food Networks.

The spontaneous indications of three associations with the notion of “high quality food” result in the conclusion that customers consider qualities that are the result of methods and means of production (natural, unprocessed, without artificial additives) to be the most important (cf. Table 3). These are linked with the awareness of cooperative members regarding the health risk coming from mass food production.

**Table 3.** Notions associated with high quality food – percent of indications

Category	% of respondents
Natural, unprocessed	28.15
Without artificial additives	19.26
Tasty	12.35
Organic	11.36
Fresh	9.14
Local, rural	6.67
Fair, care for environment during cultivation	6.67
Safe	2.47
Expensive	1.73
Looking good	0.49
Cheap	0.49
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: own calculations based on the results of the questionnaire.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Kooperatywa Grochowska has 70 members, only 3 of which are men.

<sup>5</sup> Average net household income per capita in Poland in 2014 was PLN 1,340 per month (stat.gov.pl).

<sup>6</sup> Most cooperatives meet once a week.

The fact that the type of cultivation is an important factor for the cooperatives members is reflected by the highest ranking given to the option “food produced without artificial additives...”, when answering the question *What is important to you when deciding on purchasing food products?* (cf. Table 4). Another category (after indicating that a given product was tasty) in the area of popularity was indication that the product was locally produced, followed by indication that it “was produced in Poland”. It is worth considering at this point what “being local” actually means. The respondents indicated that “being local” (*how do you understand the concept of a local product?*) means that the product is not produced further than 80 km away from the point of sale (40% responses) or that it is produced in the same voivodeship as it is sold (33% responses). In the third place was the “produced in Poland” category. This is a very broad category, but also underlines the meaning of some forms of locality.

Other set of answers given to the question *What is important to you when deciding on purchasing food?* tackled the issues described by Peri as ethical requirements, here considered as a respect for the animal rights (not violated within the production cycle of the product), such as a fair trade certificate.

**Table 4.** What is important to you when deciding on purchasing food?

Category	Average rating (1 = unimportant; 5 = very important)
Production with no artificial additives	4.69
Taste	4.6
Local production	4.3
Production in Poland	4.2
Respect for the animal rights (not violated within the production cycle of the product)	4.2
I or someone from my coop knows the manufacturer/farmer	4.1
Local, small manufacturer	4.1
I know exactly what area the product comes from	4.0
Unique health properties	3.7
Fair Trade certificate	3.5
Certificate of organic production	3.3
Not available in supermarkets	2.9

Source: own calculations based on the results of the questionnaire.

Sensory requirements, such as taste (ranked third in spontaneous indications and second in the question regarding purchasing decision factors), good appearance

(second to last in spontaneous indications) are not very crucial, especially when it comes to the visual aspect. This approach is similar to the attitudes of most Poles (cf. TNS OBOP 2011).

As far as mass-produced food is concerned, issues of safety became crucial, determining the individual stages of production (especially when corporate retailers came into play) and forming a valid category of buyer behavior. According to Sage (2003), "they prevail over the ecological and domestic qualities." The notion of "food safety" itself doesn't seem to be much of a value for the respondents – only 2.47% questionnaires were returned with safety being one of the three most important factors determining high quality food. However, to say that cooperative members do not take issues related to food safety into consideration would not be true. With this consumer group, food safety also entails knowledge of its origin, the method of production, and the identity of the producer, resulting in transparency, as defined by Goodman.

Peri's model presents specific guarantee requirements, but this notion is understood differently among cooperative members. The fact of being able to show a formal certificate is not that crucial – 11% of the respondents included environmental aspects in their definitions of high quality food. Organic character of production is not, however, synonymous with being certified. According to the answers to the question *What is important to you when deciding to buy food?* (cf. Table 4) – certification of organic production or fair trade ranked rather low in the scale, 3.3 and 3.5 respectively. However, what Peri called traceability seems to be very important for the respondents. Knowing the farmer/producer personally ranked very high among the cooperative members – 4.1 in the scale, followed by the knowledge of the area of the food's cultivation and production. Subsequently, the confirmation of the source of validity of product's origin is further acknowledged in the response to the question related to the criteria the individual cooperatives follow when searching for suppliers. The highest importance was given to the fact that the respondent knew the farmer personally (25% responses), followed by their knowing the food was produced locally (21.3%). Holding a certificate of organic production by farmers was indicated as the third criterion for choosing them as suppliers to cooperatives. Information on the farmer being able to show a certificate received 17% responses. Food quality and safety are the results of trust and mutual relations, both between the consumers themselves and between the consumers and producers. Reciprocity and social control both play crucial roles here.

Price, i.e. one of the two requirements of the product/market system according to Peri, which is a decisive factor while shopping for most Poles (cf. TNS OBOP 2011), was almost unimportant for this group. Price, regardless of being low (0.5%) or high (1.7%) is not a category used to describe the product as quality

one. It can be confirmed by the fact that less than a third of the respondents joined cooperatives for cheaper food. The issue of access to high quality food and ideological considerations turned to be more important than price, according to the indicated motivations to join the cooperative. One has to remember that prices in consumer cooperatives are lower than in organic stores or slow food markets, but higher than in big supermarkets and members of consumer cooperatives are quite well-off when compared to the average Pole. Taking into account Peri's model (see Table 2), the Author concludes that the most important elements fit into the requirements concerning the production context. Peri emphasises that these are immaterial requirements of quality. In the context of the studied consumer group, the circumstances of production of the given product are important, so the product is analysed along the lines of who, where, and when. This is the result of psychological and emotional effect that combines food with memories and a certain vision of life. The second important group of aspects for the food cooperative members when defining food quality is the aspects which derive from psychological requirements. This means food cooperative members are more consumers than customers.

## 6. Discussion

According to Marsden (Sage 2003, p. 6) consumer cooperative members define food qualities through specific characteristics of the place of production, the production process and qualities of the people involved in the production. Cooperative members ceased to trust in quality and safety measures used by mass food producers. Many of the rules of massive food production are rejected by cooperative members as well as farmers engaged in the alternative food network. The reason behind it is that they are viewed as irrational, associated with excessive bureaucracy and resulting in the lowering of nutritional value or taste quality. Safety means shifting from the rules of the "industrial world" to the rules of the "domestic world" where safety is the result of trust, direct consumer/supplier relations or traditions and not standardised norms. The high level of education of the respondents results in a good understanding of food production rules. What is more important is the ability to negotiate the definition of food quality in the course of interacting with farmers and other food producers. Phenomenological sociology ought to be brought into focus here, in order to understand that the context is of both a cognitive and interactive character, and as Jabłońska noted, it is in this context that "definitions are agreed upon, thanks to which mutual understanding is possible and the change in socially shared knowledge is made" (Jabłońska 2013, p. 52). Thanks to the context of direct and (what is also important) repetitive interaction

with the suppliers and other coop members, criteria of food quality and safety are agreed upon. In the course of the relation, cooperative members learn the rules of food production (such as the seasonal character of certain fruit, vegetables, grains, and e.g. goat milk), while suppliers learn about the needs and expectations of their customers. In this specific social context, definitions of high quality food products are constantly being developed. The basic dimensions therefore are transparency, both in terms of provenance and ways of production (including animal rights) which cannot be guaranteed by the available certificates. Taste is also an important factor – high quality food needs to be tasty. The respondents are also aware that quality food can't be cheap and do not consider it in those terms. Buying food in a cooperative is not just about satisfying hunger, but is also a matter of ideology.

Cooperatives are based on reciprocity and trust. Each member of the cooperative must work for the good of the community. At the same time she/he has a right to benefits from its operation as well as equal rights to determine the rules of operation of this institution. Trust is also the axis around which the concept of quality is formed. Although a substantial part of the products sold in cooperatives has no formal certificates<sup>7</sup>, the organizational trust developed within cooperatives along with endogenous regulations replaces the attributes of quality awarded by state and commercial institutions. These regulations are based on active participation of members of consumer cooperatives, their knowledge regarding food issues, as well as on full transparency of food producers, including visits on their farms or facilities.

Consumer cooperatives, as mentioned at the beginning of the article, may be perceived as forms of social innovation. It needs to be stressed that this is not innovation in the sense of providing new products; moreover, these innovations often oppose technological advancements (the buyers often search for traditional fruit or grain cultivars or products made with traditional recipes). Here we are facing retro-innovation. In this context it means that cooperative members acting as consumers undertake new roles: they cease to be rational buyers satisfied by market mechanisms, and become subjective social individuals. Through their activity they have a power to challenge the accepted meaning of certain concepts. Here, an important question arises of how much their activity translates into a new system of common perception and definition of quality. Are social cooperatives truly laboratories, shaping new attitudes towards food, setting new demands and methods of verifying quality of food products? Commercial activities associated with the ideas of social cooperatives such as Lokalny Rolnik or Rano Zebrano are becoming more popular, and they are being promoted with the use of the same keywords that

<sup>7</sup> Cooperative members usually demand laboratory tests on foodstuff of animal origin and animal byproducts.

are important for cooperative members – tasty, local, traditional, seasonal, natural and organic food. This indicates that the ideas behind the concept of high quality food can be applied to a group wider than just the cooperative members. Still, the Polish research projects into food quality and consumer behaviour show that there is a dissonance between declarations (saying that food quality is an important aspect) and actual consumer behaviour, where price is the decisive factor in the purchase of farming and food products (cf. TNS OBOP 2011). The dissonance is the consequence of the proven fact that higher food quality translates into higher prices (Cyran 2014) and thus price-driven decisions often exclude the purchases of high quality food products.

## 7. Conclusions

The notion of quality food is a flexible one, changing in time, and it is context-dependent. The idea of food quality entails a number of factors. Emphasized are immaterial requirements of quality. For those people who consider food, its origin and production context important, and who allocate time and financial resources to the idea (this can definitely be said of cooperative members), the aspects enabling recognition of the origins of food and its ways and methods of production are the most important. Quality conventions are embedded in face-to-face interaction. Between consumer cooperative food members the concept of food quality is built on individual and organizational trust, while rejecting confidence in institutions, i.e. the state.

Although the number and operational range of consumer cooperatives form consumer behavior a marginal bit, the actions they undertake facilitate a change in the discourse on food quality, and in the broader perspective – they serve to change the food consumption paradigm.

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## Społeczny proces definiowania wysokiej jakości żywności w świetle opinii członków polskich kooperatyw spożywczych

**Streszczenie:** Celem artykułu jest pokazanie, w jaki sposób członkowie kooperatyw spożywczych rozumieją pojęcie wysokiej jakości żywności. Kooperatywy spożywczesą jednym z rodzajów alternatywnych sieci żywności. Są zjawiskiem niszowym, można je jednak postrzegać w kategoriach nowych ruchów społecznych, a więc promotorów istotnych zmian, w tym wypadku związanych z systemem produkcji, dystrybucji i konsumpcji żywności. Pojęcie jakości żywności jest wieloznaczne, a jego definicja zmienia się w zależności od tego, kto i w jakim kontekście społecznym je definiuje. W artykule odwołano się do analitycznego modelu sposobu definiowania jakości żywności zaproponowanego przez Claudia Periego, który łączy perspektywę ekonomiczną z socjologiczno-psychologiczną.

Analiza odwołuje się do fragmentów badań własnych zrealizowanych na przełomie lat 2015 i 2016 wśród członków polskich kooperatyw spożywczych. Badani zwracają uwagę, przede wszystkim, na pozamaterialne cechy jakości żywności (takie jak sposób i miejsce produkcji i sprzedawy danego produktu). Jakość i bezpieczeństwo żywności, w opinii badanej grupy, są wynikowymi indywidualnego (pomiędzy poszczególnymi członkami, jak i do rolników – dostawców żywności) i organizacyjnego zaufania, przy ograniczonym zaufaniu do instytucji publicznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** jakość żywności, alternatywne sieci żywności (Alternative Food Networks), kooperatywy.

