

“What is a sustainable diet?”
Insights from the study of collective food procurement networks

In this paper we wish to introduce first the framework and then some current research results from the *Food Citizens?* project (*Food Citizens? Collective Food Procurement in European Cities. Solidarity and diversity, skill and scale. ERC Consolidator project n. 724151*) and how it relates to investigations about “efforts across different contexts to change food consumption practices in sustainable directions” (in *Aims of the Conference*). Our contribution to the discussion consists in drawing links between styles of food procurement and diet, focusing on the collective dimension. Using ethnographic methods, the second part of the talk will present some context specific analysis and report from direct observation of civil society-led initiatives.

We problematize the question “what is a sustainable diet?”, first by contextualizing sustainability vis a vis lifestyles and styles of food provisioning within the comparative research framework of the *Food Citizens?* teamwork, then by drawing on preliminary findings of ethnographic research conducted in Turin during winter 2019 with two different collective food procurement networks (also named in the literature as “alternative food networks”). In both case studies, the methods employed are participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

The first case study is the *Gruppo di Acquisto Solidale - GAS - La Cavagnetta*, namely a “solidarity purchase group” (e.g. Grasseni, 2013; Forno *et al.*, 2015) gathering around 60 families. It is a well-structured association, with internal regulations and a directive board, and makes use of an online platform to facilitate communication and systematize orders and payments (Regolamento 8/4/2017). The second case study is the group *Food Not Bombs Augusta Taurinorum*, which, in line with the homonymous international movement, is a grassroots initiative promoting food recuperation, collective meal preparation and free distribution (Heynen, 2010). This group based in Turin, active since March 2016, is open to all and attendance is never compulsory. The free food distribution is particularly targeted to homeless people in the streets and in shelters.

We will discuss how the concept of sustainable diet emerged differently in the two groups. In the case of the *GAS*, two historical figures explained how different types of engagement of fellow members related to various visions of the *GAS*, sustainable food and solidarity. The two presented problematics linked to the lack of active participation of most families, who tended to distance themselves from *GAS* management and collective decision-making, “using the *GAS* as a quality food supermarket”, which jeopardized the continuation of the network. They also referred to the results of an internal questionnaire showing the many different criteria of quality and sustainability considered important by *GAS* members (Questionario sui criteri di scelta prodotti e fornitori, 2017). Within *Food not Bombs*, a sustainable diet was framed by one of the group coordinators in terms of social inclusion and right to food. For him, the organization of food-related activities involved the creation of a space and time of sociability, an encounter between citizens, and a dialogue with marginality. In material terms, sustainability lied in the recuperation of food leftovers otherwise wasted and the preparation

of vegetarian meals, which corresponded to a conditional sanitary constraint as well as a debated choice.

By illustrating how the concept of sustainable diet is understood differently within and across specific sub-cultures of food provisioning, we wish to draw broader conclusions about how these examples hold significance both content-wise and in methodological terms. They emphasize the many ways in which a diet is not only understood and practiced as consumption but also as a form of procurement and participation in collective endeavors. These situations also reveal different social, cultural and moral dimensions of the “sustainable diet”, which become visible in the ways groups members decide to enact such diet. Additional ethnographic research in this line can help to explore deeper these differences and shed light on the elements of the dominant food culture reproduced or altered. It is also functional to put forward into the sustainable diet debate matters of class distinction, urban transformation and marginality.

References

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