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SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION VS SOCIAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ORGANIC FOOD PRODUCERS AND PURCHASERS

Abstract: The aim of the article is to present selected aspects of sustainable consumption and their social dimension. The article characterises organic farming as the main factor of sustainable development and social benefits resulting from the sales of organic products. It gives an example of networks connecting producers and consumers of organic products. These networks are an example of good practice in shortening the food chain and they prove the ecological awareness of healthy food producers and purchasers. It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that as far as the aspect of social relations and connections between these groups is concerned, it is possible to notice very important premises for the creation and tightening of mutual bonds.

Key words: organic farming, producer-consumer networks, social bonds

INTRODUCTION

Due to the industrial development in Europe in the 18th century there were dynamic changes, which started a new socioeconomic order. The development of civilisation brought measurable benefits, on the one hand, and ecological loss, on the other hand. The consequences of these changes affected the post-industrial society. As people inherited the natural environment in a state of degradation, they were obliged to take responsibility for it and in fact, it was necessary to satisfy social, economic and ecological interests at the same time. The industrial revolution led to the development of industrial society. It created a lifestyle, which in postmodern terms is referred to as consumerism. This phenomenon is a threat to balance between the development of economy allowing for the needs and interests of society and the natural environment. Adequate proportions between these aspects can be kept through sustainable consumption, which together with sustainable production makes the basis of sustainable development.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Sustainable production consists in applying safe means and methods, which make optimal use of natural resources, i.e. they are used with due responsibility and in reasonable amounts. When consumers purchase such products, they become part of the sustainable consumption system. It means both acquiring goods of particular quality, which were produced in an environmentally-friendly way, and purchasing products in the amounts which are justified by real needs. Thus, the consumer is a link between production and consumption. Modern forms of sales, which are developing dynamically, chiefly on the Internet, generate benefits for consumers. They save time, are comfortable to use and provide access to a wider range of products and services. This phenomenon also contributes to changes in the culture of postmodern society. It particularly causes the disappearance of direct social relations. However, there are also forms of online sales, where the consumer is not only a recipient of products, but also an entity with whom the producer establishes a personal relationship. The previous virtual contact is automatically transformed into a direct dependence resulting from the buy-sell transaction. This article gives examples of online sales to present the context of social bonds and sustainable consumption based on organic production.

RESULTS

The purchasing of products and services favours establishing and maintaining direct relations between consumers as well as between producers and purchasers. The appearance of the Internet

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caused the disappearance of face-to-face contacts between the participants of buy-sell transactions. In postmodern society consumption is chiefly identified with new forms of purchasing products and services. Shopping centres, which are called 'temples of consumption', have become not only the places where people purchase goods but also where they spend their free time, socialise and have contact with mass culture. As a result, people visiting shopping centres have become part of the community manipulated by mass media and business elites [Gilejko 2008].

In contrast to industrial society, contemporary consumer society tends to be oriented to behaviours related with consumption rather than production. The process of consumption implemented through new means of communication causes changes in the model of consumption and lifestyle [Bylok 2009]. New forms of selling consumer goods on the telephone and Internet favour these changes. Thanks to online offers of various products and services consumers can complexly satisfy their needs [Stempnakowski 2007]. However, apart from the unquestionable benefits of technologies enabling modern forms of sales, there are also certain dangers. As Lech Zacher stresses, the ideals of culture change their significance in a consumer society. He asks the following questions: If the market creates a consumer, what creates a man of culture? Will non-market values gain advantage on the market? Who should be a positive-role model of non-market values and what reward can we expect for it? What sort of culture will develop in a society where bonds between people are loosening? Will there be any culture in an e-herd or rules of the game only [Zacher 2008]?

The consumer society begins to develop into an interactive society. Manuel Castells points to the new form of community, which is concentrated within the world wide web. In consideration of the structure, purpose and future of interactive communities the author makes references to numerous studies and theories, which are often contradictory. On the one hand, there are opinions which definitely point to the development of new, virtual communities and new forms of social bonds. Others see the development of computerisation as a cause of progressing social atomisation and personal isolation, which results in losing touch with the real world [Castells 2008]. In order to analyse these processes it is important to distinguish between strong and weak bonds. Thanks to the web it is possible to establish bonds even with a very large number of participants, but these bonds are relatively weak. However, it is an advantage of the Internet that it is possible to establish bonds even, or perhaps mostly, with strangers. Interactions have egalitarian nature. In face-to-face interactions interpersonal contacts are determined by biological and social features. By contrast, relationships established on the Internet tend to weaken the significance of these differences. In this approach, due to the fact that the Internet extends social bonds, it counterbalances individualisation processes and it may favour civic engagement. Online communication provides a perfect opportunity for sincere, open discussions. Despite weak bonds between web users, they often support each other and sometimes this support is very strong. The intensity of contacts usually does not go along with their durability. The easiness of making acquaintances, which does not require intensive engagement of the people who aspire to be members of particular online communities, is proportional to the easiness of breaking these contacts. Therefore, Castells [2008] asks the question whether virtual communities are real communities. It is not possible to give a definite answer to this question. The author finally says that these bonds can be called communities, but they are not physical communities. Nevertheless, these are real communities but they function in a virtual dimension. Although this type of community is based on weak bonds, it is highly diversified and specialised. These communities do not follow or imitate other forms of life, but they are characterised by their own quality and uniqueness. They enable participation in many communities as well as membership in so-called partial communities. Apart from that, online communities intensify trends oriented towards privatisation of socialisation. It means that social networks are concentrated around individuals and they maintain both personal contact and online relations with them.



Thus, the consumer society perceived through the perspective of interpersonal relations, which are determined by interactive contacts, generates two types of dependence – based on strong or weak bonds. As far as the role of bonds in the consumer society is concerned, it is advisable to take a closer look at the process of consumption and assess whether maintaining balance in production, distribution and consumption has positive influence or is neutral to the tightening of interpersonal relations.

Sustainable consumption refers to all these areas of human activity which involve the consumption and use of natural and material resources as well as services at different levels – ranging from the individual level to the global society. We can speak of sustainable consumption when it involves optimal use of resources and creation of new products and services allowing for the needs of people and the natural environment. Conscious use of the existing potential must satisfy not only current but also future needs. This means that producers and consumers have the duty to take care of future generations and they must leave the environment in a state that will enable optimal existence.

Sustainable consumption is a vast area for theoretical considerations focusing on different processes, mechanisms and places of its occurrence. My analysis of sustainable consumption in the aspect of social bonds connecting producers and consumers will concentrate on organic farming, which combines both areas of sustainable consumption. On the one hand, it is based on optimal use of environmental resources, including the need to maintain equilibrium in the ecosystem. On the other hand, it is based on the development of conscious consumer attitudes, which will be manifested through the preference of healthy, organic food. Organic farming plays an important role in sustainable development as it enables simultaneous achievement of social, economic and ecological goals. By fulfilling the social mission of natural, sustainable food producers and consumers, organic farming becomes not only a goal by itself but also a form of complex, modern management. It is an element of the activity of various organisations propagating environmentally-friendly, society-oriented and health-promoting ideas and attitudes to life. Organic farming can be an important component of broader socioeconomic systems, e.g. sustainable farming, socially sustainable farming, civic farming, Local Action Groups, Partnership Groups, agritourism, slow-food philosophy, ecological education, etc.

Organic farming differs from other forms of management not only in applying strict criteria to agricultural production and processing of crops but also in the marketing of organic products. Contemporary organic farming is a more modern system of agricultural production based on the experience of previous generations and latest scientific achievements. It is not commonly known that the world organic farming began in the present-day area of Poland. It is usually accepted that organic farming was invented and initiated by Rudolf Steiner, who organised the first course in biodynamic farming in 1924 in Kobierzyce near Wrocław [Osetek & Osetek 1989]. According to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), the primary goals of organic farming are to produce food of high nutritional value and support all life processes taking place in nature rather than make attempts to dominate it. Other goals of organic farming are to avoid all forms of contamination and pollution of the environment, use materials and substances which can be recycled within or outside the farm, provide farm animals with the conditions that meet the needs of individual species and to follow the social aspects of organic farming [<http://www.ifoam.org>].

The sales of various organic products results in financial gains for the seller and satisfaction with the transaction for the buyer. There are also additional benefits gained from the purchase of a



healthy product. Another benefit, which is not always noticed by the entities participating in the transaction is the exchange of knowledge about organic food in its broad sense²³.

The first exchange network I would like to discuss in this article is the web portal 'LokalnaZywność.pl', where organic products can be purchased or exchanged. The network operates not only in Poland but also in other EU countries, which provide some products. The founders describe their portal as a private initiative of two men, who wanted to facilitate access to local (fresh, tasty, authentic) food [<http://lokalnazywnosc.pl>]. They say that their mission is to connect providers and consumers of local food. Producers and providers can promote their offers by placing free advertisements and links to their websites on the portal and the Facebook profile. Consumers can easily search for particular products, their producers and providers [<http://lokalnazywnosc.pl/strony/o-nas>]. Valuable local products are continuously offered for sale. Apart from that, they can be purchased at special events and fairs, which are organised at a specific time (once in a longer period of time or regularly). These events can be easily found or added to the calendar [<http://lokalnazywnosc.pl/wydarzenia>]. The portal acts as an agent in the sales of goods and services under the following categories: agritourism, poultry, gastronomy, eggs, local sales, local basket, meat, dairy, fruit, bread/mill, processed products, undergrowth, fish/seafood, seedlings/flowers, alcohols, vegetables, pick your own, others [<http://lokalnazywnosc.pl>].

Due to the multitude of goods and services offered and due to the large area of operation (all Poland and some other EU countries) such portals as 'LokalnaZywność.pl' chiefly give benefits to individuals. However, they have minimal if any contribution to the creation/tightening of social bonds in local communities.

Another example of a sales network is the portal 'odrolnika.pl', which was created by farmers from small family farms. The portal operates around the cities of Tarnów, Kraków and Katowice. The main goal of the portal is to create a network of direct contacts between producers and consumers. Both parties regularly meet on the website. Thanks to the portal, they can learn about customers' individual needs and preferences and they can adjust their production to these requirements. Both parties benefit from trade transactions because products do not include a high margin, which middlemen would normally impose. The elimination of a middlemen from the food chain reduces the price. In consequence, the producer imposes a low margin, which makes the sales profitable. Clients can benefit from transactions, because they can place an order for a specific amount of food produced with a particular technology by producers they know and trust. To sum up, this form of exchange (buy-sell transaction) gives small farm owners an opportunity to earn more money than from buying stations, which often pay less than the cost of production. On the other hand, consumers can buy fresh products of known origin at lower prices than on the secondary market [<http://www.odrolnika.pl>]. This cooperation structure enables trade participants to create a strong and stable network based on mutual trust, which is developed by interaction at each stage of the exchange process. The network sells only organic and traditional products made in small amounts by small family farms. The offer comprises about 75 species and 225 cultivars of crops [<http://www.odrolnika.pl>].

Portals with limited range, such as 'odrolnika.pl', are initiatives giving measurable profits to local communities. By creation and support given to the initiatives which aid further operation of small, traditional farms, cultivation of native crops and breeding of native animal species it is possible to preserve the folklore and tradition of Polish rural areas for future generations [<http://www.grupa.odrolnika.pl>].

As far as the creation/tightening of social bonds is concerned, local communities can benefit more from agrologistic initiatives of small, local exchange structures rather than from big,

²³ This applies both to the knowledge about the values of organic food and methods of its production, preparation, storage, etc.



nationwide networks. The latter usually do not involve direct contact. Instead, information is exchanged on the telephone or on the Internet and products are delivered by a courier. Although broad-range portals participate in the exchange of goods and services, from the perspective of social bonds they are of minimal value in comparison with the exchange process based on regular and personal contacts between participants, who create a dense and structured network providing considerable benefits resulting from interrelations and propagation of environmentally-friendly and society-oriented values and attitudes. The development of producer-consumer networks results in connection between participants of buy-sell transactions and exchange of information about goods produced/purchased.

DISCUSSION

Sustainable management based on rational exploitation of the natural environment and healthy nutrition is also a philosophy of life. Problems of environmental protection and maintenance of biodiversity as well as threats caused by intensive monocultural farming were discussed by Ulrich Beck in the concept of risk society [2004] and by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash in the concept of reflexive modernisation [2009].

The economic conditions in modern sustainable development systems require extended functions of organic farming. Apart from the basic alimentary function, this branch is expected and legally obliged to provide sources of renewable energy. Among different types of renewable sources biofuels, biomass and biogas are the ones of agricultural origin. In this context it is necessary to stress the role of organic farmers as renewable energy prosumers. A prosumer is both a producer and consumer of energy generated from small renewable sources, which are usually environmentally friendly. As of the end of December 2012, there were about 26,000 organic farms in Poland, occupying an area of more than 650,000 ha. According to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture, in comparison with 2011, in 2012 the area and number of organic farms increased by 10%. At present organic farms occupy about 3.4% of the total farmland. In the last decade the area occupied by organically grown crops has doubled in the EU. At present in Europe there is about 29% of the global area of organically grown crops. The following EU countries have the largest organic plantations: Spain (1.6 million ha), Italy (1.1 million ha) and Germany (1 million ha). Among the new EU member-states Poland and the Czech Republic have the largest areas occupied by organic farms [Report on Organic Farming in Poland 2011-2012].

The study conducted by the Institute of Rural Development and Agriculture, Polish Academy of Sciences in 2013 outlines the role of organic farming and its social functions in Poland. The results of the study indicate that under favourable circumstances organic farming may become both a resource and a value not only for the people who are directly involved in organic food production but it may also cause development of the community and place where it is located. The study also proved that organic farming had positive influence on the local labour market. There was almost no unemployment in the places where commodity organic farming developed on a large scale. Farmers producing organic food belong to an elite in the agri-food industry. The authors of the study found that a rooted market can develop effectively if there is a leader doing pioneer work in order to implement, develop and promote this type of production. This is usually a know-how leader. In the locations under study there were people with theoretical knowledge and practical experience, who were ready to share it with farmers interested in organic production [Organic Farming as a Factor of Local Development – an Analysis of Selected Cases].

It is necessary to stress the educational role of organic farming. As results from the study conducted by the Agricultural Advisory Centre, Kraków Branch, in 2010 in Poland there were 197 farms offering education, including 47 certified organic farms. What needs to be particularly stressed is the social mission in its broad sense, related to health-promoting education, which



mostly targets children. Simultaneously, it gives a possibility to eliminate children's false beliefs about the origin of food [Agritourist Educational Farms – Ideas and Good Examples].

The potential benefits from the sales/purchase of organic products should also be perceived in a broader context rather than only in the aspect of trade participants or social benefits. Politicians also see a value added in this activity. As can be read in the introduction to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Local Food Systems' published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 2 April 2011 (2011/C 104/01), 'local food systems support the local and regional economy (...); short distribution channels lead to greater interaction between consumers and producers. They create relationships based on trust (...)'. Then we can read in Paragraph 18 that 'offering local products with authentic, traditional, original, sustainable, seasonal or other locally appreciated features supports social cohesion and community spirit and encourages the community to display environmentally friendly behaviour. Sales outlets for local products such as direct sales stalls and open-air markets often contribute to the process of social and professional inclusion for consumers, producers and sellers.'

CONCLUSIONS

Apart from significant economic and environment-friendly functions, organic farming also has social goals. The most important social goal is to develop socially sustainable farming, which combines economic, ecological and social functions. It follows the slow food philosophy as a philosophy of life, which is also supported and promoted by the EU.

Organic production is often combined with the activity of agritourist farms, which have a wide range of significant social functions. They support and promote folk culture, healthy food and healthy lifestyle. Some agritourist farms also offer education, which results in measurable profits for agriculture and schools. Thus, we can pose the thesis that organic food, its production and distribution have positive influence on society and local communities. As far as distribution is concerned, it is necessary to stress the fact that networks developing on the Internet connect organic food producers and consumers. Web portals with broad, nationwide or even international range as well as those with local range have numerous positive functions. They shorten the food chain, facilitate access to organic products and promote them and they act for the natural environment. The analysis of these portals in terms of the establishment and tightening of social bonds shows that online sales encompassing macroregions does not favour production addressed to specific recipients and their expectations. The role of large portals is limited to being agents in buy-sell transactions, but they do not act as agents in direct contacts between producers and consumers. On the other hand, portals with regional range represent the interests of both parties and organise distribution so as to enable exchange of information and know-how about organic production and products. The manner of delivery (products delivered to the client's door or to a collecting station) favours establishing interpersonal relations between providers and recipients as well as consumers of organic products, who meet at the place of delivery. It seems that this form of purchasing is closer to traditional forms of sales based on direct relations. In reference to the thesis recounted by Castells, which assumed that the development of computerisation would intensify social atomisation, the example of a small-range web portal proves the opposite dependences, which favour building social integrity. The creation of virtual networks, which transform into real networks of connections, and offering local, chiefly organic products favours not only social integrity but it also strengthens the sense of community based on behaviours that are friendly to the natural environment. It is also necessary to stress the renaissance of traditional places where goods can be sold and purchased and which are also used for online transactions. They can be used as an alternative to large-space commercial activity because they provide space for direct social contacts. In consequence, they facilitate creation and tightening of bonds as well as sustainable consumption.



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