



„Europejski Fundusz Rolny na rzecz Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich: Europa inwestująca w obszary wiejskie”.
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**Polish Innovation Foundation – Multimedia campaign Eat Wisely, Know What You Eat –
Short Food Supply Chains a source of innovation for agricultural and rural development.**



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THE CHALLENGE OF BROKERING SHORTER FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS – Lessons and experience from Malopolska (Poland)

Rafal Serafin¹

SUMMARY

How can we meet the growing demand from consumers who want lower cost, quality and tasty food and want to know where it comes from and how it is produced? One solution is to cut out intermediaries and shorten the social and geographical distance between consumers and food producers. This raises the important challenge of working out ways of organizing geographically dispersed smallholders and family farms into food systems, which can provide quality food at scale and in a systematic and sustained way. The need is to organise collaborative arrangements with farmers in order to access markets, mobilise resources and gain political influence in ways which engage them as partners for consumers and other stakeholders in co-creating food systems. Partnership brokering is key to this co-creating process, which is always unfinished. In recent years, partnership brokering approaches have been applied in the Malopolska region in Poland by the Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation. The experience illustrates the partnership brokering challenges involved in efforts to shorten the food supply chain by organising geographically-dispersed farmers and small food producers into a collaborating and self-organising partnership aimed at increasing access to locally-produced food.

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Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

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CHANGING FOOD MARKETS

In North America and Europe, consumers are demanding quality food at lower cost, but with a growing preference for food that is healthy, tasty, organic/eco-friendly and safe. Eating responsibly is becoming an important part of efforts to promote healthier and more sustainable lifestyles. Consumers want food that is readily accessible and to know where their food comes from and how it is produced (Conner et al., 2010; Kneafsey et al. 2013; Friends of the Earth 2015).

SHORTENING FOOD CHAINS



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Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

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One response to such consumer demand lies in organising local or short food chain systems (Box 1).

Box 1 : What are short food chains?

A food chain describes the distance between a food producer and a food consumer. In contemporary agro-industrial systems, food chains are complex with numerous intermediaries:

Short food chains have as **few links as possible** between the food producer and the citizen who eats the food. Agreeing on a maximum number of links (or intermediaries) is difficult because the number of intermediaries needed varies for different products, in different places. For example, there is a debate about whether ‘service providers’ such as abattoirs should be counted as part of the chain.

The reasons for having reduced links in the chain are the most important factor when considering whether a food chain is ‘short’ or not. ‘Short’ food chains are not simply reducible to the number of links in the chain, because they are concerned with a set of values and principles and address societal demands:

The citizen who eats the food knows exactly where the food comes from and can contact the producer directly for information – in other words the food chain is **transparent** [addressing citizen demand for food that can be trusted]

The producer is able to retain a greater share of the **value** of the food that is sold [addressing producer need to sustain or expand their income]

The ‘social proximity’ between producers and citizens is of more importance than the ‘physical distance’ [addressing societal demands for a better, more equitable and **sustainable** food system].

EIP-Agri Focus on group on short food chains (Kneafsey, 2014) – see

<http://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en/content/innovative-short-food-supply-chain-management>

Short food chains shorten the geographic and economic distance between producers and consumers, reducing costs, decreasing environmental impacts and assuring security of supply, and access to quality, tasty food of known local origin (Renting et al. 2003; Vandecandelaere et al, 2010; European Coordination Via Campesina, 2011; Kneafsey, 2013; 2014; Friends of the Earth 2015). Above all, they help develop the local economy.



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Fair trade, urban farming, growing your own, food cooperatives, consumer supported agriculture, farmers’ markets and connecting directly with farmers are all variations on a single theme – accessing food of known origin (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998; Grimm, 2009; Marsden 2010; Renting et al. 2012). Such initiatives are also a response or alternative to the increasingly industrialised agri-systems based on long and complex food supply chains, which involve numerous intermediaries, including wholesalers, distributors, food processors and sales people.

But how do we achieve shorter food supply chains and local food systems capable of providing locally-produced quality food for consumers at scale and in a systematic and sustained way?. Partnership brokering can play a key role in organising farmers and consumers and other stakeholders in food systems into collaborating groups or partnerships focused on shortening food chains. By organising food producers, especially small farmers and agricultural smallholders, it can help them gain improved access to markets, to mobilise resources and to increase their political representation and influence in economy and society. They can become more proactive participants in re-defining food systems.

ORGANISING SMALL FARMERS

Smallholder agriculture with its focus on subsistence and small-scale agri-production is central to shortening food supply chains. For this reason, there is growing interest in both developed and developing countries in redefining the contribution of small farmers and agricultural smallholders in our food systems.

There is growing conviction that smallholder agriculture can be part of the solution not only to providing healthier food, but also to alleviating poverty, combating social and economic exclusion, protecting natural and cultural heritage, ensuring food security, as well as maintaining ecological life-support systems while revitalising local economies (Hazell et al. 2010; Vandecastelaere et al. 2010; Arias et al., 2013; FAO, 2014)



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The European Union is placing more emphasis on small farms by drawing attention to their multi-functional role in economy and society in agricultural policies and recognizing shortened food supply chains as a priority for innovation. The agricultural smallholders that still characterise the agricultural sectors in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, Greece and Portugal are coming to be recognised as resources and opportunities as opposed to something that should be consigned to the past (Kneasley, 2014).

The Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) is also drawing attention to the role and contribution of smallholder agriculture. In an increasingly global world dominated by corporations, it may be surprising to some that family farming remains the predominant form of agriculture in the food

production sector in both developed and developing countries. According to the FAO, the majority of the world’s 570 million farms are small and operated by families. Smallholders contribute as much as 70% of food produced! Although it is important to note that most food produced is not traded or is traded locally with only about a quarter of food produced transiting through the global market (HLPE, 2013; FAO 2014).



Fig. 1: Origin-based virtuous circle for building brand value of local food systems



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Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

Polish Innovation Foundation – Multimedia campaign Eat Wisely, Know What You Eat – Short Food Supply Chains a source of innovation for agricultural and rural development.

The implication is that local food systems favouring smallholder agriculture should be promoted and developed more strongly where they already exist and revitalised or restored where they have been displaced by large-scale industrial agri-systems, with their complex food chains comprising numerous intermediaries (Poulton et al. 2010, Vandecandelaere et al. 2010; Kneasley 2014). But how might this be achieved?

One promising approach is to focus on linking people, places and products in ways that generate a virtuous circle that brings increased income to local producers who organize joint action to connect with consumers by building brand value of their products by promoting their origin. The FAO has produced a practical guide and an on-line tool to guide this approach (see <http://www.fao.org/food-quality-origin/webtool/about-olq/en/>)

Partnership brokering is needed because collaboration or partnership must encompass not just farmers and consumers, but also other stakeholders in the local food system, including public agencies, community groups, media, schools, researchers. It can provide the ‘bonding factor’ or ‘glue’ that brings in and keeps the farmers’ and the farming perspective in the forefront. The focus must be on farmers because operating in isolation, farmers are not able to deal with market failures, institutional barriers, systemic weaknesses and skills or knowledge gaps. An investment in partnership brokering in this way is an investment in building local food systems as transformative partnerships, which over time build the skills, knowledge, know-how and markets that enable them to self-organise and sustain themselves, generating benefits for all participating partners.

LEARNING FROM MALOPOLSKA (POLAND) EXPERIENCE

The proposition is that – given the right conditions - smallholder agriculture and family farming can play a serious role in providing quality food to the communities in which they operate. Put simply, family farming coupled with small-scale food production can become a realistic alternative to the heavily subsidized industrial farming systems that are seeking to dominate global agriculture. For this to happen, the food chain from field to fork must be shortened.



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Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

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The challenge is to find ways of stimulating the growth and development of short food supply chains both in terms of the numbers of producers involved and in the volumes traded so as to increase farm incomes and contribute to nutrition or food security.

An ambitious initiative aimed at using a partnership approach to create a local food system, which can achieve scale as a market-oriented venture and turn the liability of a fragmented agrarian structure into an asset or opportunity for securing nutrition and food security is under way in the Malopolska region in Poland. This is a region of approx. 140,000 small and highly fragmented privately-owned farm holdings, averaging 4 ha in size. Poland as a whole still has over a million small farms.



Fig. 2: Malopolska in Europe

Local Products from Malopolska is a local food system developed with small food producers from several territories in Malopolska in the years 2011-2017 with the aim and ambition to connect small producers with consumers (see www.produktlokalny.pl). From the very beginning, the focus was on shortening the food supply chain by organising farmers and small food producers into a collaborating and self-organising group in order to increase their incomes, keeping them in small-scale food production, and in this way, giving access to locally-produced food to people living and visiting the Malopolska region. Agricultural smallholders and small producers have recognised that working together brings many advantages, especially through market access through farmers' markets, on farm-sales, restaurants, internet sales and other distribution channels.



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With its many agricultural holdings, Poland’s Malopolska region represents an opportunity to turn increasingly socially and economically excluded rural areas into a resource for building food security for rural and urban populations based on access to locally-produced food of known-origin (traceable). Regional and local governments are recognising that making locally-produced food coupled with increasing smallholder incomes is important for revitalising rural economies in ways that combat poverty and social exclusion, while contributing to the protection of natural and cultural heritage values and food security. The commitment to building and strengthening local food systems is now an important part of the Regional Government’s development strategy and has also become an important priority for national government.



DIRECT SALES -
 shortening the distance from field to plate



Buy healthy, fresh, tasty food
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Fig 3: Motivation driving Local Products from Malopolska



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Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

Polish Innovation Foundation – Multimedia campaign Eat Wisely, Know What You Eat – Short Food Supply Chains a source of innovation for agricultural and rural development.

Local Products from Malopolska was initiated in 2011 by the Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation – an NGO supporting grassroots environmental action. It was co-created by a group of approximately 100 farmers/producers and about 15 local NGO, business and public sector partners, including the regional government authorities. The ambition was to organise sales of an ever wider range of locally-produced food products directly to consumers, engaging more and more farmers, smallholders and producers through a process of building trust and reputation as a means for creating and maintaining short value chains.

The approach involved an ongoing process of identifying local and regional-scale stakeholders (especially producers) aimed at turning them into partners who share in the risks, costs and benefits. The idea was to build *Local Products from Malopolska* as a trademark encompassing local brands, with its own farmer support, quality control, marketing and promotion, sales and distribution and governance. Those participating in *Local Products from Malopolska* also campaigned for a more favourable policy and regulatory environment for local farmers as local food producers and for local food systems, especially with respect to more farmer-friendly food safety and tax regulations.



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Operacja współfinansowana ze środków Unii Europejskiej w ramach Schematu II Pomocy Technicznej
„Krajowa Sieć Obszarów Wiejskich” Programu Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014–2020
Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

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Local products from specific producers and regions

- 228 farmers/producers
- from 11 regions of origin in Malopolska
- offering 25 product groupings (jointly 472 products)



Fig 4: Aspiring to a scale up Local Products from Malopolska for farmers & consumers

The key to starting-up *Local Products from Malopolska* was designing a long term project based on bringing together people, organizations and resources sharing a common motivation and philosophy (i.e. commitment to grassroots action, co-creation with those affected, environmental protection, local democracy) but operating through largely unconnected action-oriented initiatives, projects and programmes – mostly not directly related to food.



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Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

Polish Innovation Foundation – Multimedia campaign Eat Wisely, Know What You Eat – Short Food Supply Chains a source of innovation for agricultural and rural development.

The role of the Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation was to provide the ‘bonding factor’ and an organizing framework (conceptual and practical) with a vision, a method and a process-oriented programme of work to achieve that vision based on linking people, products and places. Inspiration and frameworks for action came from the FAO via a Swiss organization – Réseau Echange Développement Durable (REDD) – and its work on origin-based food systems (www.origin-food.org), which resulted in a guide (Vandecandelaere et al. 2010). This has served to inform the Malopolska project and provided the basis for a three-year fundraising effort, which resulted in the Foundation securing funding support from the Swiss-Polish Cooperation Programme (a government-administered grants programme) for developing and implementing the project in the years 2011-2017.

PARTNERSHIP BROKERING

When it initiated *Local Products from Malopolska* as a partnership project, the Foundation had expertise primarily in mobilising grassroots environmental projects through cross-sector partnerships. The Foundation did not have access to specialised expertise related to food systems, farming, agri-processing, food marketing and distribution and so forth. Moreover, the organization was perceived (if at all) as an environmental NGO by local and national government, business, media and other NGOs. In this regard, the Foundation was not associated strongly with agriculture, food and rural development issues and was largely unknown among public and private agricultural support providers – and indeed among farmers.

In this situation, the Foundation built an alliance with the Malopolska Agricultural Chamber, which formally represents farmers. The Director of the Chamber joined the Foundation’s board of trustees and helped shape the *Local Products from Malopolska* project from the very beginning. He helped the project team engage with agriculture and rural development organizations and networks and drawing attention to the importance of campaigning for more flexible hygiene rules for small producers as compared to those demanded of large-scale food producers.



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Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

Polish Innovation Foundation – Multimedia campaign Eat Wisely, Know What You Eat – Short Food Supply Chains a source of innovation for agricultural and rural development.

It became apparent at this early stage that success of the project in building up a functioning local food system would depend on the extent to which the potential of small farmers and smallholders selling directly to consumers – both individual consumers and institutional consumers (e.g. schools, hospitals etc) - could be realised. In this regard, an important need lay in understanding better the opportunities, barriers and conditions to direct selling by farmers. This prompted the Foundation to join forces with the Agricultural Chamber and relevant food safety authorities (veterinary service, sanitary inspectorate) to carry out a programme of consultations with farmers operating in Malopolska. In the winter of 2012/2013, a consultation programme involving over 40 meetings, involving over 1000 farmers was completed, building up a picture of the over-regulated realities of direct food sales in Poland, as well as a constituency of support for the *Local Products from Malopolska* initiative.

The work of the Committee identified numerous opportunities for enacting more farmer-friendly food safety and tax regulations. With the change in government in 2015, a suite of new regulatory changes in food safety and tax system were introduced, along with policy initiatives, to enable the development of local food systems based on direct sales and shortening the value chain. A new form of trading was introduced called Agricultural Retail Trade (RHD), which gave farmers the possibility to process and sell food produced on their farms and retain their ‘farmer’ status. This provided farmers producing for their own needs to participate legally in the market. Without wide-ranging collaboration, including also small food-producers, the enabling regulatory environment would likely have not been put into place.

The key challenge identified was the lack of clear or well-defined framework for organising short value chain food systems based on direct selling both from the point of view of farmers (who simply lack the legal basis for direct sales of processed food products) and of consumers (who increasingly demand locally-grown food of known origin). The information and insights gathered from local farmers, officials from the food inspectorate, tax offices, local governments, agricultural advisors prompted the Foundation and its constituency of farmers, NGOs and other organisations committed to promoting locally-produced food to launch a campaign entitled *Legalise Local Food*. In the years that followed, the campaign helped build a constituency of support at the national level, bringing about the establishment of a sub-committee of the Agriculture Committee of the Polish Parliament to review direct selling legislation.

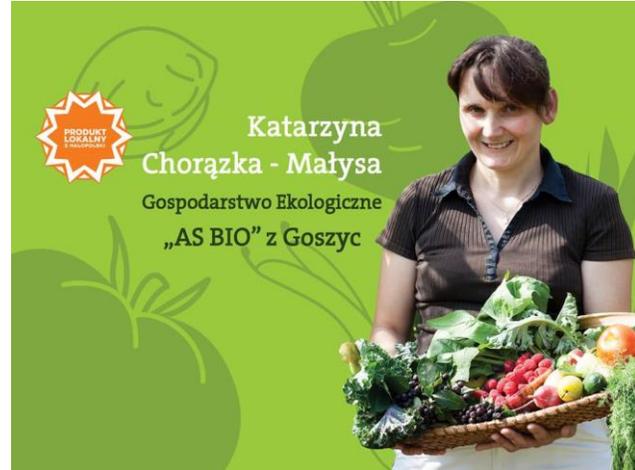


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„Krajowa Sieć Obszarów Wiejskich” Programu Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014–2020
Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

Polish Innovation Foundation – Multimedia campaign Eat Wisely, Know What You Eat – Short Food Supply Chains a source of innovation for agricultural and rural development.

Fig. 5 Producers are key building brand value

The lesson learned is that it is not easy to build a constituency and secure partners through a partnership-building process, where no-one is in charge by definition. Leadership and shared responsibility is emergent. Success depends on the interaction of all involved. Trust must be earned through practical action, it cannot be manufactured or mimicked. But once trust and reputation is achieved stability and sustainability follow.



CONSTITUENCY BUILDING

Emphasizing a constituency-building function, the Foundation sought through brokering *Local Products from Malopolska* to gain the trust of consumers by connecting them directly with farmers/producers and vice-versa in order to generating actual sales opportunities. This was quite different to other approaches at the time, which focused on branding, labelling and certification – and not on working out sales opportunities. This meant on the one hand working with farmers and food producers – organizing them into collaborations with their own sense of identity and self-worth and on the other with consumers to provide them with ready access to locally-produced food.

The key collaborative driver proved increasing sales and income for the farmers and local food producers involved. This translated into building market value for the products produced and sold under the *Local Products from Malopolska* umbrella, which enabled and favoured joint selling over acting alone. It is important to note that there was no compulsion to participate in joint selling initiatives. In fact, many individual farmers and food producers went on to be successful as individual business operations.



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Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

Polish Innovation Foundation – Multimedia campaign Eat Wisely, Know What You Eat – Short Food Supply Chains a source of innovation for agricultural and rural development.

The core brokering function of *Local Products from Malopolska* entailed an ongoing process of defining and re-defining (and enforcing!) a set of set of rules, according to which the scheme functioned – defining the practical meaning of locally-produced food. The set of rules developed collaboratively was simultaneously, a vision, charter and a code of practice defining which products and which producers should be involved in the scheme. The aspiration of the Foundation was to broker the *Local Products from Malopolska* as a trademark attesting to the authenticity and traceability of producers participating in the system and of the products offered for sale through a range of distribution channels, including shops, farmers’ markets, restaurants, on-farm sales and IT ordering and other new forms of delivery system. This is still very much the case today.

In this way, the *Local Products from Malopolska* was grown and developed not as an alternative or competitor to existing brands and certification schemes, but as a formula for sales and distribution of locally-produced food that adds value by communicating to consumers the authenticity and traceability of products offered for sale. In this approach, farmers and food producers are co-authors of the code-of-practice and also responsible for ensuring compliance. The philosophy and method is to ensure that each and every producer participating in *Local Products from Malopolska* is responsible for quality and authenticity assurance rather than an external police or enforce. The voice and contribution of the farmers and food producers is essential but not sufficient. The partnership must take into account the needs, requirements and aspirations of consumers, especially the growing demand for locally-grown food of known (traceable) origin.

The lesson is that the code of practice is always unfinished. This is because it must be lived and enforced through a mechanism of mutual trust rather than (costly) external policing. Success in this regard has the potential for significantly decreasing costs and increasing competitiveness in the market place. In its partnership brokering role, the Foundation has sought to create a space or framework for initiatives, projects and programmes generated by those participating in and co-creating *Local Products from Malopolska*. In this sense, the system is self-organizing and always adapting and evolving to the needs, circumstances and opportunities of both farmers and consumers.



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Operacja współfinansowana ze środków Unii Europejskiej w ramach Schematu II Pomocy Technicznej
„Krajowa Sieć Obszarów Wiejskich” Programu Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014–2020
Instytucja Zarządzająca Programem Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2014-2020 - Minister Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi

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To ensure flexibility and wide-ranging engagement, the various components of *Local Products of Malopolska* were encouraged to be developed as largely independent and self-organising initiatives, driven by those most directly involved and benefiting most directly. By 2019, several such components had become business operations in their own right, self-organising and only loosely connected with one another. The flagship initiative of Local Products from Malopolska was the creation in 2015 of Krakow’s first exclusively farmers’ market called the Targ Pietruszkowy (Parsley Market) in Krakow. This now operates as a successful business operation operated by a foundation seeking to revitalise, inter alia through the market, a run-down part of Krakow. The market has inspired many similar initiatives in other parts of Krakow and in other cities. There is today a farmers’ market in almost all Polish cities.

Other components included Buyers’ Clubs – internet-supported shops that bring together consumers and producers in weekly sales transactions, which are now being replicated across Poland, a Kitchen Incubator built as a communal or shared processing facility for small farmers in Stryszow just outside of Krakow, which has become a model for other operations being developed in other parts of Poland with support from the Ministry of Agriculture. Yet another component is a Bistro coupled with a Buyers Club that is operated by the Foundation in Krakow’s Nowa Huta Cultural Centre as a social business serving both as an outlet for locally-produced food and a model for showing what is possible and what needs to be addressed to successfully shorten the food chain. All these components, as well as a variety of stakeholders, combine together to form something of an ‘institutional ecosystem’ which seeks constantly to exploit the sense of a greater ‘whole’ for the benefit of the individual interacting components. It is worth noting that many of those involved have little or no recognition for the importance of the ‘whole’ or of the larger short food system of which they are part. What is important is not that all involved have a concern and awareness for the big picture or the system ‘as a whole’ – but it is important that some do. It is this that constitutes the brokering function of the system.

The experiences gained in understanding the interaction of the various components emphasise the need for a brokering function, which enables the components including the food producers and customers, to verify, consolidate and turn the code-of-practice into a cultural or living scheme, where no single group, entity or individual is in charge and the ‘whole’ continues to be reconfigured and redefined in response to changing needs, opportunities and circumstances of



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those involved. The experience gained attests to the observation that is the personalised relationship between buyer and seller that matters most – and that it is not possible to short-cut or substitute a personalised relationship between buyer and seller.

Fig. 6: Personal relationships are key to trust building

ARTNERSHIP BROKERING AS INNOVATION

Malopolska experience in brokering local food systems is relevant also for many regions in Europe and North America, which have lost their small farmers and their capability for growing and producing food locally. It is a resource for urban farming movements so prominent in the ‘Old Europe’ are driving a desire to rediscover, reinvent and restore local food systems that many still remember.

Polish small farmers represent an opportunity and resource for local food systems that need to be brokered locally, regionally and internationally. Every region or territory must develop its own local food system, which is adapted to local needs, circumstances and opportunities. There is no recipe or blue-print. Only a partnership building process for mobilising people and resources that can be shared, enriched and learned. It must be principle-based without seeking to determine the outcomes or results. This kind of approach is advocated by the Partnership Brokers Association, which has developed 5 partnering principles, which have provided a reference and guidance for Local Products from Malopolska. These are elaborated further on the PBA website – www.partnershipbrokers.org and summarised in Fig. 6 below.





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CORE PRINCIPLES FOR BROKERING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS



Fig 7: Partnership brokering principles as developed by the Partnership Brokers Association (www.partnershipbrokers.org)

Improving partnership brokering for food systems is an important area for innovation as it relates to using partnership action to overcome barriers to achieving scale to meeting the growing demand for locally-produced food direct from farmers (Serafin, 2004; Blisset, 2009; Alison et al. 2014) In many parts of Europe this relates to a lack of small farms. But in Malopolska and Poland more generally, the chief difficulty lies in finding ways of sourcing larger volumes from small, dispersed and subsistence-oriented farming. This is about brokering new ways of connecting many geographically-dispersed small food producers (mostly in rural areas) to many geographically-dispersed food consumers (mostly in cities) that treat the decentralised nature of many-to-many relationships as an asset or opportunity. A possible answer lies in emphasising authentic personalised human interactions (as opposed to anonymous industrial interactions) through three developments.



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1. scaling up a collaborative or partnership based quality/authenticity assurance system (as a basis for building brand value and providing for traceability) by involving also government and corporates not just as stakeholders, but as co-creating partners. This might also lead to creating new types of collaborative institutional arrangements for operating short food chain systems that also enable sharing economy solutions.
2. scaling up of distribution channels/sales opportunities to cater for an ever larger number and variety of small producers and individual consumers through innovative IT and logistical systems, which can bring consumers the variety, diversity and seasonality of locally-produced food in a way that fits into changing lifestyles, which emphasise healthy and responsible eating. New IT solutions, including social media, block-chain and others recognise decentralisation as a premium and source of competitive advantage where centralised industrial systems now dominate.
3. Harnessing, expanding and developing decentralised solutions to small-scale food production and processing methods and technologies, including decentralised energy, water recycling/retention and irrigation. In this way, production costs can be reduced and made more efficient.



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