

Consumer demands to organic food products

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Background

The project is part of a co-operation between The Danish Consumer Council, The Danish Technical University and Roskilde University. The duration of the project is two years.

The aim of the project is to deepen the knowledge of organic consumption on a basis of qualitative methodologies, to supplement the already existing research on consumer preferences done by Mette Wier and Suzanne Bechman and others (Wier, 2000; Beckmann et.al, 2001).

The organic sector has experienced a big growth and then stagnation of the organic food market in Denmark; and especially differences between attitudes and practices of organic consumers has been an important paradox to illuminate. Therefore the analysis of the consumers will be framed within an everyday life perspective and the consumers' experience of influence will also be discussed.

Objective

The project has been focused on two casestudies: the supermarkets and public school canteens as organic sales and production arenas. The first case illuminates the biggest organic consumption arena and the experiences of the consumers. The second case illuminates an alternative arena of organic consumption. The goal is to broaden the knowledge of the two consumption arenas, the experiences of the consumers and possible future strategies for developing an organic conversion of the food sector; framed by a discussion of late modernity, ecological modernization and sustainable development.

The results of the first case, sales and consumption in supermarkets, shows that there are different strategies for selling organic products between the supermarkets. Coop Denmark, Irma and Iso all want to have a broad assortment of organic products to meet the demands of the organic consumers. But Iso and in particular Irma stake at product development and high quality products. Whereas Netto stakes at discount products and only have the best selling organic products in their assortment. Iso and Irma are smaller supermarket chains situated primarily in the capital region, where the sales of organic products are high. Coop Denmark and Netto are nationwide supermarket chains and especially Coop Denmark has had problems in earning money at the organic products. The supermarkets are all managed centrally which makes it difficult for the single shops to have flexible strategies adapted to the local demands and for example selling local products.

Looking at the consumer side a complex picture shows up. At a concrete level the consumers have some critical remarks about the assortment of organic products, the quality (of especially vegetables) and the higher prices, as well as difficulties in finding the products in the supermarkets and need of spending more time on shopping if they wants to buy more special organic products.

In my analysis of organic consumption I have outlined four dimensions that play an important role for the understanding of attitudes and practice.

1. *The Dimension of Sustainability*: the interviewees buy organic products because of their critical awareness of environmental problems and health problems connected to the conventional foodsector. They mention the groundwater and the future generation as important dimensions. They want's to send a message to the surrounding society, but they do not feel heard and some of them doubt the effect of buying organic products.
2. *The Dimension of Uncertainty*: The food scandals have affected the consumers and this influence organic products in a both positive and negative way, because it makes people turn to organic food products but some also question whether they can trust the organic food producers – in the light of all the food scandals they have been affected by.
3. *Personal and Cultural dimension*: the individuals actual lifesituation, its history, knowledge and the food and shopping habits play a role in the consumption practices. It influences, for example, the consumption practice whether you are single, student, newly have become a parent, have an illness, a very busy daily life etc.
4. *The Dimension of Utility*: points at an experience of lack of time and money people want to spend on buying food; as well as how willing they are to change habits - when it means that it gets more difficult and they have to spend more time on shopping, cooking and changing food habits.

These four dimensions outline different kinds of experience, knowledge and rationalities. And it shows that consumption is a complex field, because in the late modern society consumption also raises fundamental questions about risk, uncertainty, health and sustainability.

But it is not an easy job to handle all the dimensions and the interviewees were familiar with the need of negotiations as part of their consumptions practice. They also agreed that it was not possible to live correct according to their ethical and environmental awareness all the time.

They believe that they as consumers have a part of the responsibility but they also think that the supermarkets and politicians should do more.

The second case study will throw light on how organic food products are handled in public school canteens. The experiences and attitudes of the involved actors, as well as the consumers, will be examined; leading to a discussion of the potentials of public consumption and future development strategies.

Progress - 2003

Phd. Course: Qualitative Methods (Roskilde University)

Paper presentation: "Ecological modernisation in the Danish foodsector: A casestudy of the sale and consumption of organic foodproducts in supermarkets", European Society of Rural Sociology, Organic panel, Sligo, Ireland, august, 2003.

Article to "Journal of Environmental Transdisciplinary Studies" (based onthe paper presented in Sligo)

Paper presentation: "Organic consumption – between ideals and everyday life", Nordic Workshop, The Consumer Council, Copenhagen, October, 2003.

Planning Phd. Course: Modernization of food networks.

Supervising and teaching.

Finishing the case study number one: organic consumption in supermarkets. Continuing with the case study number two of organic food consumption in public schools.

Plans – 2004

Phd. Course: “Modernisation of food networks” (Soar/Ruc/Auc/Dmu)

Paper presentation, International Society of Rural Sociology, Trondheim, August, 2004.

Making an article

April-July: Staying at a University in England

Finishing the Phd. Thesis