

Project title: Consumer demands to organic food products

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Background and objective

My Ph.D. project is part of a cooperative research project between Roskilde University, the Danish Technical University and the Danish Consumer Council. We have been exploring the issue of consumer demands related to organic food production and finding ways of strengthening the organic food sector in Denmark.

In my Ph.D. project I am working with two cases: supermarkets and public kitchens as organic consumption arenas and I wish to discuss the broader perspectives of the food sector and related areas in connection with sustainable development, based on my case studies. These intentions are reflected in the problem formulation of my Ph.D. thesis:

“What kind of possibilities and openings are there for the food sector to develop in both a democratic and sustainable direction? – And what kind of understandings and conflicts of organic production are there in relation to the supermarkets and public consumer arenas?”

Related to this are two sub-questions focussing on the individuals as consumers and citizens:

“What rationales and personal negotiations do the citizens connect to their understandings and experiences when consuming organic food? And what kind of consumption situations and negotiation networks are they a part of?”

The point of this perspective is to go beyond the idea, currently dominant, which is that the simple way of developing the organic food sector is to make the consumers buy more organic food, and to achieve this we need more knowledge about marketing. This kind of knowledge has been and will continue to be, produced by the commercial partners.

My research attempts to go beyond this and investigate the experiences of the consumers of organic products, and the kind of negotiations that lie behind their practices as consumers and their thoughts as citizens. It is known from other consumer research that there is a difference between what people say they want and what their actual consumer practice reflect. In my analysis of this dilemma and I have outlined four dimensions that influence the consumption of organic food:

1. Sustainability
2. Risk
3. Utility and availability
4. Social and cultural dimensions connected to everyday life.

Furthermore I discuss scenarios of a further development of the organic sector in Denmark, based on the experiences from the supermarket sector and the public catering sector in Denmark.

Progress – 2004

- 3 months at Cardiff University, Centre of City and Regional planning
- Participation in Phd. Course: “Modernisation of food networks” (arranged by Soar/RUC/AUC/DMU).
- Paper at the international sustainable research Conference, Manchester, UK (March 2004)
- Paper at the organic workshop, World Congress of Rural Sociology, Trondheim, Norway (July 2004)
- Chapter written to a book about organic production and consumption (related to the project cooperation with the Danish Consumer Council, forthcoming)
- Finish the dissertation (by the end of 2004)

The duration of the PhD work has been extended to 1/12-2004 because additional money has been granted from the Danish Consumer Council to cover the activity related to the above mentioned book about organic production and consumption.

Publications

Dorthe Ilsøe: “Ecological modernization of the Danish food sector – the road to sustainable development?” paper to the International Sustainable Development Research Conference, Manchester, March 2004.

Dorthe Ilsøe: “Organic Production - between Conventionalisation and Changes in Food Culture”, paper to the International Society of Rural Sociology World Congress, Trondheim, July 2004.

Dorthe Ilsøe: "Økologi mellem idealer, marked og madkultur" (draft contribution to anthology about organic production and consumption, forthcoming).