
The role of social networks in the transition towards sustainable food systems

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Abstract

Food systems are defined as "all processes involved in feeding a population" (Goodman, 1997). Beyond sanitary crises emphasized by the 'mad cow crisis' and its aftermath, food systems have been challenged during the last decade by a set of challenges in European countries: increasing economic competition, pressure on natural resources, responsibility of agriculture in climate change as well as new requirements addressed by social movements in consumption and by the new generation of farmers claim for systemic changes in production, processing and distribution models towards more sustainable practices (Esnouf et al., 2012). Questioned by sustainability (Barbier, 2010), renewed by 'alternative food networks' (Renting et al. 2003), challenged by technological advances but also controversies (Vanloqueren, Baret, 2009), European agricultures appear as exemplary cases to question the emergent processes of responsible innovation, from models of open innovation taking care of users' requirements and skills (Joly et al., 2013), to other approaches addressing 'social innovation' (Moulaert et al., 2013).

Highlighted in the diffusion of technological innovations in agriculture modernisation during and after the 2nd World War (Ryan, Gross, 1943; Mendras, 1967), the role of social networks remains little investigated in the late evolutions of this sector. Beyond few works showing how professional networks specific morphologies and dynamics favour learning processes around localized technical changes in the French case (Compagnone, Hellec, 2015), social networks in this sector are often put forward, in the literature on 'alternative/local food networks' especially, but rarely deepened concretely (Chiffolleau, 2009), as it has been the case in industry, service and business (Håkansson, Johanson, 1993). Both quantitative and qualitative approaches of social networks are needed to better understand conditions and effects of changes and innovations towards sustainable food systems, from emergence to diffusion, as well as to support the dynamics of change. Addressing the dynamics of food systems with a social network perspective, this session is open to all disciplines. Welcome are papers that target these issues with qualitative or quantitative approach. Qualitative proposals have to go beyond incantations to networks and quantitative approaches have to be grounded by empirical work and field knowledge.

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