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Rural gentrification and local food networks: the case of a shopping community in a small Hungarian rural town

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ABSTRACT

Academic literature identifies local food networks and producer-consumer communities as important initiators of local community development and sources of sustainable production and consumption. A small producer-consumer community, a so-called shopping community, in a small rural town in Hungary is examined in this case study. The size of the region and the limited number of potential consumers lead to a number of specific characteristics. Both the organisers and many of the producers in this shopping community are urban newcomers to the region, and are members of higher social status groups in the local society. The initiative is based on a number of principles and methods of environmental sustainability and applies very strict criteria for the involvement of the producers. Through interviews with organisers and producers and focus groups with consumers and local stakeholders, the case study analyses aspects of social inclusion and exclusion. Who is allowed to participate in the community, both to produce and to consume? How embedded is this shopping community in the local society? The case illustrates how a shopping community – a local food network – can contribute to the social exclusion of local producers and consumers, as well as to the process of rural gentrification, even though it also contributes to environmental sustainability. The article explores the pros and cons of local food systems from a social and community point of view.

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Local food; shopping community; sustainability; rural gentrification

Introduction

In the last decades, short food supply chains and local food systems have been considered as significant drivers of sustainability (Lamine et al. 2012; Marsden 2012; Martinez et al. 2010). The importance of building producer-consumer networks has been extensively explored in the scientific literature in several aspects, such as environmentally friendly behaviour, support for small-scale agriculture, etc. A number of researchers have highlighted the challenges and obstacles to maintaining networks and keeping producers and consumers in these communities, and motivations and attitudes are also important areas of study (Brekken, Parks, and Lundgren 2017; Campbell and MacRae 2013; Drottberger, Melin, and Lundgren 2021; Kovács, Lendvai, and Beke 2022; Nurse Rainbolt, Onozaka, and McFadden 2012). However, there is little research on the role and place of such communities

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and networks in local society and their social and community impacts, participation and involvement in the local food system in the context of rural social restructuring, such as rural gentrification.

Community building and the restoration and strengthening of trust could be an important element in the regeneration of rural areas. Local food networks could be one of the possible tools to achieve this. It is crucial to develop civil society organisations and to build local networks between small farmers, entrepreneurs and consumers. Small communities could and should be the basis and starting point for a more sustainable way of food production and consumption and a more sustainable way of life for rural society. However, the involvement and participation of the members of the local society in a wider sense is crucial for the local food network to contribute to the well-being of the local society. As many cases have shown, urban newcomers and their demands for sustainable lifestyles can be important drivers for both the development of local food networks and rural regeneration (Akgün et al. 2011; Janc et al. 2023; Robert-Boeuf 2023).

Therefore, in order to explore how a consumer-producer network is built up and to examine the aspects of social inclusion and exclusion in the local food network, we present a case study of a small and well-organised consumer-producer community in a small town. What are the participation criteria for both consumers and producers? Why do they want to participate? Why are they willing to follow the rules? What are the advantages and disadvantages of participation for the farmers? How do their social backgrounds, such as urban middle-class characteristics and values, affect their embeddedness in the local network? To understand this, we analyse stakeholders' narratives about the shopping community, their perceptions of their involvement and participation in the local food network.

As a theoretical background, we build our analysis on the literature on local food networks. However, we also pay attention to the related literature on rural gentrification, and rural restructuring which can provide a useful framework for our analysis. In this paper, we examine a case study to gain a deeper insight into the participation aspects of local food networks, the social restructuring aspects of participation, and the social inclusion and exclusion aspects of local food networks.

In the following part of the paper, the background literature is presented. This is followed by a description of the case study region together with the main agricultural and local food network context of Hungary. After the methodological section, the results of the analysis of the case study are presented. The final section discusses and summarises our findings in the broader context of the literature on local food networks and the rural gentrification.

Literature background

Local food networks and rural society

Local food networks are increasingly popular ways for consumers to connect with local farmers and access fresh, sustainable produce. The role of farmers in these networks is crucial. They are the primary producers of the food that consumers seek. There is a very rich interdisciplinary literature that examines LFNs, including the motivations of participants, both consumers and producers, the benefits and challenges they face, and their impact on food production, as well as their role and position in agriculture (Brekken, Parks, and Lundgren 2017; Campbell and MacRae 2013; Donaher and Lynes 2017; Drottberger, Melin, and Lundgren 2021; Enthoven and Van den Broeck 2021; Kovács, Lendvai, and Beke 2022).

Farmers in the local food system tend to have smaller farms and have a focus on the production of high quality, mainly organic produce. It is important for both producers and consumers that farmers in LFNs grow a wide variety of fruits and vegetables using sustainable and environmentally friendly practices. The qualitative case study of 14 young vegetable producers by Drottberger, Melin, and Lundgren (2021) showed that young producers are motivated by dual incentives for farming, with one important motivator being entrepreneurship and the other being sustainability as a value and a behaviour.

A number of different types of LFN have been described in the academic literature. LFNs include: Farmers' Markets, Community Supported Agriculture, where supporting farmers is crucial. Other types of LFN, where community building is the most emphasised goal, can be community gardening, educational farms or community kitchens. A common feature of LFNs is that they interact and build relationships between consumers and producers (Fourat et al. 2020).

Most local food network concepts, such as local food systems, alternative food networks, short food supply chains and civic food networks, emphasise ethical values, but there is a new concept, values-based territorial food networks (VTFN), which offers a broader approach than previous concepts by considering the role of cultural and territorial contexts in shaping sustainable food systems. It emphasises the importance of networks of different actors, such as newcomers, locals, producers, consumers and intermediaries, and shows that these actors are connected around ethical values such as social justice and environmental integrity(Nemes et al. 2023).

Involvement, social inclusion or, in other words, social embeddedness are important aspects of LFN and they are closely linked to building a community based on the cooperation and participation of different actors (Chiffoleau et al. 2019; Olson 2019). Most of the studies emphasise the social inclusion and social cohesion features of LFNs. However, many aspects of social exclusion and inequalities also appear in the findings, as participants in most LFNs are characterised by a higher social status. This means that they have the knowledge, skills and sufficient economic capital to participate in both producing and consuming (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Fourat et al. 2020; Franklin, Newton, and McEntee 2011; Kirwan et al. 2013; Olson 2019). In seeking to achieve democratic access to food, several concepts have emerged. Diversity is seen as a community resource, inclusion is emphasised as a community process, and inclusiveness is described as a community outcome. These concepts are interrelated, as noted in a review by Talmage and Knopf (2017).

Local Food Networks provide an opportunity for farmers to sell their produce directly to the consumer. As well as providing a platform for farmers to connect with their customers, LFNs are also an opportunity for consumers to learn about the production process and the benefits of buying locally grown produce. Developing a direct relationship with consumers requires farmers to have specific knowledge and skills. Consumers in the local food network are a specific and minority segment of the consumer population. They are motivated by specific values and norms associated with the public benefits of environmental sustainability and are also willing to pay more for it, indicating a higher social status (Nurse Rainbolt, Onozaka, and McFadden 2012). Thus, urban middle-class people are the most active participants in the local food network, as several studies proved (Robert-Boeuf 2023).

Diversity and inclusion are related but distinct concepts: diversity refers to the representation of different demographic groups, while inclusion is the process of creating an environment where everyone feels valued and has equal access to opportunities. Access is a key indicator of social inclusion and can be achieved through various means. It is measured in terms of equity, equality, entitlement and employment and is associated with high democratic values and social empowerment (Van Herzele, De Clercq, and Wiedemann 2005). Participation is therefore essential for making short supply chains accessible to all (Chiffoleau et al. 2019; Chiffoleau and Dourian 2020) and has also been identified as a practical means of achieving social inclusion as defined by Hinrichs and Kremer (2002).

The issues outlined above call for the theory of rural gentrification (Phillips 1993). This refers to the role of the urban middle class in the social restructuring of rural areas. Studies have mainly focused on the demands and activities of urban middle and upper-middle-class migrants in rural areas in terms of housing, leisure and tourism. However, local food network initiatives are often strongly linked to the urban middle class, particularly as consumers, and these consumers also have a strong impact on local farming systems (Csizmady et al. 2021; Robert-Boeuf 2023; Torre and Fonseca 2023). The values and the demand for sustainability have in many cases arrived as a consumer demand in the rural areas (Csizmady et al. 2021). Rural gentrification is a complex process. It changes the local social structure, housing and economic systems and relationships. It significantly

affects local community, culture and the natural and built environment (Guimond and Simard 2010; Lu, Rao, and Duan 2022). Rural gentrification is a two-sided process. It is part of rural development, including sustainable development, and can contribute to the well-being of rural residents. However, several groups in local society are excluded and displaced from these processes and initiatives as a result of demographic change and restructuring (Ghaffari, Klein, and Baudin 2018).

Rural gentrification also can be regarded from the perspective of consumption as it is highlighted by the consumption countryside theory too (Marsden 1999).

The consumption and production perspectives can be used to interpret the influence of rural gentrification. From a consumption perspective, it is evident that a "new culture" of consumption is developing in rural areas. This implies that the experience economy and aesthetic consumption are the main economic drivers in the process of rural gentrification. It also highlights the importance of the experience of rural cultural connotations and the development of specific cultural tastes. To interpret rural gentrification, it is necessary to examine it from the perspective of production, capital redistribution and gain, and to consider its impact on people. Sutherland (2012) explores agricultural gentrification, delineating its occurrence both externally through in-migration and internally via the reorientation of commercial farmers. It defines agricultural gentrification as the infusion of economic capital from non-farming activities, altering cultural capital from production to consumption. The study suggests that modern agricultural practices may blur the line between commercial and non-commercial farming. Structural factors like state policies and land markets facilitate these processes, raising questions about inclusivity. The study highlights the role of gentrification processes in agricultural communities, considering both external and internal drivers of change.

As agricultural productivity declines and policies weaken, rural landscapes and built environments become less attractive to capital, necessitating the emergence of diversified rural economies. This paper analyses a form of Local food network (LFN) initiative as a new model of consumption and production in rural areas from the perspective of rural gentrification.

The agricultural context of Hungary

Since the fall of socialism in 1990, Hungary's agricultural sector has significantly declined, with the number of farms reducing to 234,000. The livestock sector has been particularly affected, while arable farming has increased. In 2020, 82% of the 4.8 million hectares of agricultural land was arable, with smaller portions for fruit and vegetables (4.4%) and vines (1.3%). Tenant farms accounted for 50%, slightly more than owner farms (45%). With an aging farmer population (65% under 65 in 2020), a generational shift is evident, though over half of the owners (54.9%) have not planned for succession (Csizmady et al. 2021). An important difference is the education of the older and the next generation: older farm managers usually do not have a university degree but practical experience, while younger ones have a university degree and specialised training (Csurgó, Kovách, and Megyesi 2016).

In 2018, organic farms constituted 3.4% of Hungary's agriculture, below the EU average of 7.4%. Entering organic farming in Hungary is challenging and costly. Farmers often choose agri-environmental support (AES), a simpler, EU-supported method, over organic farming due to easier administration and lower investment, despite higher potential funding for organic farming. AES farms covered 13% of Hungary's agricultural area in 2020. Rural areas are increasingly popular for urban newcomers, who sometimes engage in farming (Csizmady et al. 2021; Csurgó et al. 2018; Kovács, Lendvai, and Beke 2022).

Urban newcomers and visitors bring new demands, attitudes and values, including new principles and behaviours towards a sustainable way of life, which affect local society and sometimes cause conflicts. Several studies in Hungary (Nemes and Tomay 2022; Tomay and Tuboly 2023) have identified the phenomenon of rural gentrification in recent decades. In many cases, urban newcomers initiate and drive the creation of new local networks and communities, including local food networks.

Shopping communities in Hungary

In Hungary, the concept of consumer-producer communities lacks a unified definition and literature is limited. The terms "Community Supported Agriculture" and "Shopping Community" appeared in Hungary in the 1990s. They have developed into "Community Agriculture", "Producer-Consumer Communities" and "AMAP Economy", among others. At the present time, shopping communities are most common in urban and peri-urban areas.

The first community-supported agriculture system in Hungary was established in 1998, while the first shopping community was founded in Budapest in 2008 by a few committed consumers wanting to make their food consumption more environmentally friendly and healthy (Dezsény, Réthy, and Balázs 2013; Kacz, Hegyi, and Gombkötő 2019). In the last few decades, there has been an increase in the number of community-supported farms and shopping communities. Today, there are almost 15 community-supported farms and about 30–40 shopping communities in Hungary (Attila 2024). The majority is located in and around the capital and in major cities [1].

The most popular form of short food chain and community-supported agriculture in Hungary is the shopping community. In this form, the customer can choose the quantity and variety of products from a pre-defined list each week. The products are bought from several local farmers who have joined the community (Khademi-Vidra and Bartha 2019). There are pick-up points where producers and consumers can meet. In addition to shopping, events can be organised. The shopping community is based on pre-ordering. This provides security for both producers and consumers and also takes into account environmental values and community interests (Zsombor and Nagyné 2020).

Some case studies from Hungary demonstrate the impact of local food systems on rural tourism and rural socio-economic development. The driver of both LFS and socio-economic development in these regions is tourist demand for premium products, and this process is strongly linked to the gentrification of certain Hungarian rural regions (Nemes et al. 2019; Nemes and Tomay 2022).

Consumer-producer communities such as shopping communities are strongly supported by civil society organisations that promote them, and bring consumers together, and some of the founding organisations also provide advice on setting up new shopping communities. The urban middle class is very active in both the civic organisation and consumption. It also appears among producers (Balázs 2012). In order to understand the motivations for participation in the context of rural-urban relations and rural gentrification, this paper focuses mainly on producers, but also on consumers and organisers in a small shopping community.

Materials and methods

This paper utilises data from two research projects on the shopping community of a small town in Hungary. As part of the H2020 RURALISATION project, we studied 30 promising and 20 confrontational cases in 12 countries, focusing on how new generations of farmers contribute to rural development in peri-urban and remote areas. A Hungarian shopping community initiative was selected for comparison with a successful German case. Data was gathered from 11 semi-structured interviews conducted in March/April 2021 with 9 active producer members, 1 formal organiser, and the initial organiser. The interviews covered themes such as the community's initial goals, operational model, membership process, production conditions, reasons for joining, and regional strengths and weaknesses.

Additionally, in the second half of 2021, we organised face-to-face confrontation workshops and focus group discussions as part of the H2020 RURALISATION project. These included seven local consumers, three producers, six NGO representatives, and two rural experts, to compare German and local practices and identify opportunities and barriers for the shopping community. Due to high interest, an online webinar and subsequent focus group discussion were held with 11 and 8 participants, respectively.

Further studies in 2022–2023 focused on consumers and local stakeholders, including ten interviews with local government and civil society organisations, to understand the shopping

community's role in the local society. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed participants to highlight important issues. The multiple methods used provided meaningful insights into the community's operations, although the general limitations of qualitative research remain. Interviews with all producer members offered a deeper understanding of their attitudes and experiences. To mitigate analysis limitations, workshops, focus groups, and additional interviews were conducted to explore the wider local context.

Results

The case study area

The studied shopping community operates in a small town and surrounding villages in Central-Hungary region. The town is located about 60 km from Budapest and about 30 km from the county centre. It is a small town with a population of about 6000. In recent decades the town and its micro-region have become increasingly popular. Houses have been bought and settled by families from the capital Budapest and the centre town of the county. The natural features of the area are very attractive and offer a rural idyll to the urban newcomers, while the big cities with their services are easily accessible from the micro-region.

Geographically, the region is a hilly area surrounded by vast lowlands. The small town is the centre of the regional initiative and is the basis for the bringing together different types of actors (NGOs, municipalities, entrepreneurs) in the area. The Network acts as a tool for networking and as an organiser of events. The network of local actors for sustainable development was initiated by a local foundation. It includes 17 municipalities and two county councils, a national park directorate, a forestry company and civic organisations.

The Network involves local farmers in its activities by providing training and inviting them to events. The initiator Foundation is highly active in engaging small local producers, offering programs, venues, information, and contacts without requiring formal cooperation agreements or membership. As a result, valuable experience and knowledge about sustainability, which is unique in Hungary, has been gained by the farmers in the study town and its micro-region.

The birth of the local shopping community

The shopping community studied in this paper, referred to as Basket, to maintain respondent anonymity, operates in a small Hungarian town. Unlike typical shopping communities in larger cities with many regional producers, Basket's limited size and consumer base offer unique insights into Hungary's consumer-producer dynamics. Established in 2018, Basket was three years old at the first research. One founder, a sustainability expert, envisioned a small, ecologically sustainable community and invited his network to the initial meeting. Attendees included seven or eight people, mainly newcomers and a local producer. The community members are typically young intellectuals with stable financial backgrounds, many being families with young children and newcomers to the micro-region.

> Our customers are mainly from the middle and upper class, including people like us who are committed to this principle. We are also middle class and do not face financial struggles at the end of the month. (Organiser 1; male)

Many of the regular consumers and organisers have moved to the countryside because they are looking for a more eco-friendly and sustainable lifestyle, healthier food for their children and to show them the beauty of this "back to the roots" lifestyle. Common interests and values are the primary reason for being together. The core group of intellectuals interested in sustainability issues share this ideology and motivation. Some core group members joined to become part of a local community, a local informal network. Others wanted access to high quality local or organic food, while still others were focused on environmental issues.

The long-term aim is to promote organic farming, educate people about sustainable living, raise environmental awareness and build communities.

> I am thinking not just of a food-focused community, but of a broader eco-community. (…) This is a long-term vision, 5 to 10 years, and it requires a lot of public education. (Organiser 1; male)

All the above-mentioned requirements were addressed in the idea of this shopping community. They got help from three other well-functioning and well-known shopping communities, with whose members the founders of Basket are still in contact.

The Basket addressed key requirements by learning from three well-functioning shopping communities. They organise a weekly pop-up market, open to casual customers, with an online platform for advance orders and additional products available for non-members. Mainly, the core group of 10 regular consumers orders in advance, while higher-status locals occasionally visit to support the idea without regular commitment.

Basket operates as a not-for-profit civil association, run voluntarily without charges to consumers. Initially, producers were not charged either, but small fees were introduced to cover incidental costs. The organisers point out that civic associations in Hungary are not allowed to engage in commercial activities for profit. However, cooperatives or local markets – which can also be the background organisation of a shopping community, as the German case shows – are allowed to do so. Nevertheless, shopping communities are mostly organised by civic associations in Hungary, the cooperative form is not known in this area. Civic associations need external funding such as LEADER+, where the short food chain is a strongly supported objective. However, access to this type of funding is limited. This means that their activities and development can be limited by the lack of funding. Civic organisations can only facilitate producer-consumer relationships without providing commercial services, unlike cooperatives in other countries like Germany.

Consumers

Three months after the initial idea was conceived, the core group organised the first pop-up market in the late summer with just five producers in the garden of the local church. Surprisingly, it was a huge success. The new initiative was something that a lot of the town people wanted to see. According to interviews, more than a hundred people attended the first market. There seemed to be a strong demand for such an initiative, even though most of those attending did not belong to the community and had not become members of the Basket.

The organisers of the Basket have been running campaigns on Facebook to reach out to consumers. They are trying to create a stable and larger group of consumers, but they haven't got very far. It seems that they have reached the limit of the number of consumers very quickly.

After the first few years, the community now has 10–15 producers as members. There are about 20 regular consumers and another 10–15 occasional consumers. That is, mainly the core group of organisers and about 10 so-called regular customers who order goods every week.

Prices are higher than in normal shops and malls, and the quantities on sale are not always sufficient even for regular consumers. This makes it difficult also for regular consumers to get the weekly amount of food they need from the shopping community. The limited number of consumers also results from the limited number of producers and the limited number of products, not just from the higher prices.

It is important to emphasise that urban newcomers, mostly with higher social status, are the most active and regular members of the community, and some indigenous people with an informal relationship with the organisers, also characterised by higher social status, such as local intellectuals, leaders of civic organisations, institutional leaders, are the other regular and occasional consumers.

> I have noticed that the majority of customers who like the Basket are people who have recently moved to the area. It is dominated by newcomers. Obviously, people who have lived here longer are less open to new things. Or, because they are used to the way things are done, they don't miss the new things as much. (Farmer 8; male)

The main drivers for becoming a regular member of this shopping community are healthy food and being part of a community with common interests and values. The members and organisers place great emphasis on values. Their aim is the sharing and promotion of their values and attitudes towards sustainability. Healthy food is the main thing that makes membership attractive to consumers. Sustainability is the second most important value. The organisers point out that many of the indigenous people, who have middle-class status, are happy with the initiative and take part as occasional consumers, for whom the Basket is an important encounter with sustainability in everyday life. The regular consumers, however, are mostly newcomers to the region, for whom healthy food is closely linked to sustainability, with an emphasis on short food chains.

Producers

The process used to select producers is very specific in this shopping community. The most important feature is that competition is limited: only one producer can be on the market for a particular product. There was some debate among the founders as to whether it made sense. Eventually, however, it was introduced.

> This is a very important thing, (… .) the principles are a little different, that we try to protect the producers, so that if there is one producer of honey, another producer of honey cannot come. This is a bit strange to me, so I had a protest against it. But, other communities do it and we adopted it for several reasons. (Founder 1; Male)

Typically there are 10–15 producers in the Basket. In the beginning there was more fluctuation, but now the Basket consists of 10–12 permanent producers who have been in the shopping community for several years. Producers are recruited from the micro-region and when one leaves another is invited to replace.

> When one honey maker said he could not participate, we invited another, with the same quality. We have some potential producers who could be good for us, but we only include one from each type of product. That is our rule. (Organiser 3, Male)

It is argued that a small shopping community cannot, by its very nature, muster enough buying power to allow more than one producer to offer the same product. If there are a number of producers with the same profile, there is a possibility that the right quantity of the product will not be sold. Consequently, it is not profitable for the producer to be part of the shopping community. The result will be the withdrawal of all producers.

> It's a small market, it might be worth one honey producer coming in, but if we let two in, they might both say it's not worth it and we'll lose both. So there is an economic consideration behind this rule.(Organiser 2; Male)

In this way, the shopping community is able to provide a secure market for its producers.

Even so, the producers have to comply with very strict requirements and quality criteria. For such a small shopping community, these very strict rules are not very common in Hungary. They have to follow quality assurance. That means they have to follow ecological standards. According to a set of criteria that they themselves have defined, the core group strictly controls all producers. However, being a member of the shopping community is an advantage for the producers because there is no competition and they can also sell their goods directly to consumers at a higher price than they would get from the purchaser.

> (…)in addition, competition also in the traditional market comes from quality. And we ensure the quality by visiting the producers and interviewing them in detail and checking them on the spot, so we say that the one who sells here in our country already meets the quality criteria, so we should not let him compete. And it's worth it for them to sell here, they don't have to lower their price to sell to a purchaser. (Organiser 1; Male)

Producers can only join the shopping community on the recommendation of other producers and consumers, to ensure that the farmer can meet the community's expectations, an introductory visit is made in each case. In most cases, however, it is the organisers who invite producers, and applications

from producers for participation are very rare. The local informal network is the basis for the recruitment of producers.

> … . when the organising team of the Basket came to us, (…) there was a conversation about where we are, what we are, where we come from, what we do, why we do what we do. (Farmer 1; Male)

The organisers are a core group of seven people who visit all the producers and do informal quality checks on the products. Ensuring that the farmers do not use chemicals that are harmful to the environment is a key requirement.

> First of all, it is very important that it is ecological. Nobody is certified organic, but we looked at everybody personally and talked to them. (…) Then, of course, it depends on the distance (…) the area (should be) within 35 kilometres (…) the criteria can be further detailed (…) After that we just invited them, and we have to make sure they have the right attitude … . (Organiser 1; male)

This means that all farmers and producers in the shopping community, even those who are not certified organic, can still practice environmentally friendly farming.

> We don't expect a complete renunciation of chemicals, because certain chemicals are allowed in organic farming. But we do expect that even if you use chemicals, you only use approved, milder chemicals. This applies not only to pesticides, but also to fertilisers. And they are very soft expectations. We expect these key aspects and also animal welfare. (Organiser 1; male)

This invitation, based on personal meetings, not only leads to a very strict quality control by the organisers, but also creates a social closeness between the organisers and the producers. This is an unintended result of the process. In particular, the organisers have chosen producers who "*speak the same language",* share the same values and behaviour, and are therefore members of the same or similar social groups.

Despite the many opportunities and positive opinions, there are some negative aspects to this producer selection rule: excluding competitors led to conflicts. On the one hand, producers could not understand why organisers wanted to tell them what they could and could not sell.

> So there is an overlap between the greengrocers, we brought them together, organised such an event and let them discuss what they wanted with it. We wanted them to share, that only one person should bring spinach, but they said no, everyone should bring what they want, and that's what they wanted. (Founder 1; male)

The case of conflict between two producers demonstrates very well the problems of their rules. Both producers sell cheese and some dairy products, one from goat's milk, the other from cow's milk. Over time, it turned out that they were both selling both type of products. One of the producers who is selling dairy products from goat's milk did not think that this meant competition between them, but the other one did and approached the organisers after they agreed to sell products both of them from both goat's and cow's milk.

> There was also a bit of an uproar because he [the newly joined producer] had agreed with the organisers that he would only sell cow products. And the first time he came to me and said it was okay if he sold goats. I said that was fine with me, but then he complained because I was selling cow products. I found the whole behaviour a bit strange. (…)I have now decided on the strategy of not creating tension on this issue, because such an agreement is simply ridiculous. I should sell the butter, but it's fine if he has it, if he doesn't have it, I will sell it. With cottage cheese it's a joke because cottage cheese goes bad very quickly. You make cottage cheese and if he doesn't have it, you can sell it. So I would rather not bother with it. Now there are people who ask me for cottage cheese, I bring it to them and that's it. Of course, there are many cases of Eskimos and few of seals, and everyone deals with the situation differently. (Farmer 8; male)

Producers may find difficult to adapt to the specific rules of the Basket. However, the main motivation for producers to join seems to be not only the stable market but also the sense of community. A sense of community is very important in motivating producers to participate. It results from the personal relationships, similar interests and social closeness of producers and consumers.

The community

Similar social backgrounds form the basis of the Basket . Many of the producers and consumers – like the organisers – are new to the area. Some of the producers are also new to farming or have moved to the area to start farming.

> Basically, (the farmers, producers) are these kind of intellectual faces who pretend to be farmers. Someone has a degree from a university, (…) horticulture. (…) the basis of trust is created by the production visit, for one thing, as I said. And then you can talk about what it produces and more (Founder 1; male)

A key aim of the organisers is to build a strong community of producers and consumers. For this reason, the events are organised according to the interests and needs of the community members. Family events have been organised because families with young children are the main consumers and producers. The founders started to organise programmes for children in order to make it easier for parents to concentrate on the buying and selling

> It was practically a family program. Which is also a big advantage of this shopping community. So that I didn't go there, and it wasn't just about selling, but the family could come, the children could come. They played together with other children, had fun, and had a program for them (Farmer 10; female)

Members feel a sense of community. They make friends, make new contacts and help each other.

> They are very helpful, so it is a very good community (Farmer 6; female)

> It was nice to meet familiar faces every week and exchange a few words, everyone is interested in each other. And also with the consumers, because many of them were regulars and when they came we always exchanged a few words. So it's a small place that fosters community. (Farmer 9; female)

Connecting with the community is the most important feature of this shopping community initiative. In the interviews, most producers emphasised that they liked being part of the Basket for community reasons rather than for the economic benefits. This shopping community provides a similar social environment for the producers as well as for the consumers. The positive effect of being part of this shopping community is the strengthening of the network on which the community relies.

These social similarities between producers and consumers implicitly show that some producers in the region are excluded. This could be because of the strict rules for organic or near-organic production, but it could also be because of social distance.

Discussion

The Basket, which operates in a small town in Hungary, represents the interface between local food networks and rural gentrification (Akgün et al. 2011; Campbell and MacRae 2013; Janc et al. 2023; Robert-Boeuf 2023). Since its establishment in 2018, it has attracted mainly urban newcomers and indigenous intellectuals with a strong commitment to ecological sustainability. Initially conceived by a sustainability expert and initiated by a small group of newcomers, Basket aims to promote sustainable food consumption and production, raise awareness of environmental issues and foster community ties. However, Basket does not have a wider reach into local society, nor is it able to involve producers or consumers in a wider social sense. The initiative operates among the local upper middle class, including mostly newcomers and some indigenous people.

The Basket faces many challenges typical of local food networks. These include maintaining consumer interest, ensuring economic sustainability for producers, and increasing environmental awareness among both consumers and producers. An additional challenge for the Basket is to operate continuously in a small town and community according to principles developed by urban consumers. A shopping community requires special knowledge, skills and commitment from both producers and consumers. Long-term residents and traditional local farmers often lack awareness of the Basket's aims and benefits. This hinders the growth and integration of the shopping community.

Moreover, the specific rules of the Basket, which limit competition, and its strict quality control standards limit the participation of producers, especially long-established local producers who often do not use environmentally friendly or organic farming methods. The Basket tries to regulate and control the producers and what they produce. This is unusual in Hungary. The fact is that local producers in the micro-region have no official organic certification, and the consumer group has no legal mechanisms to control the quality of the products, relying instead on trust and personal relationships to ensure quality. This reinforces the participation of producers with a similar social background, while at the same time, it excludes others, in particular the old local producers.

From a legal point of view, as a non-profit civil association, Basket cannot engage in commercial activities for profit, but can only facilitate the participation of consumers and producers and provide a framework for networking. The Basket can only support the participants in their organisation, but cannot provide commercial or economic support. As a civil society organisation, the Basket cannot regulate participation through legal rules for commercial activities, but only through membership. Therefore, the participation and commitment of producers and consumers from a commercial perspective are based on trust and informal relationships. This also contributes to the importance of similar social backgrounds of participants, both consumers and producers.

This limited participation of local society raises critical questions about the inclusivity and broader applicability of such sustainable initiatives. This limited integration and embedding contrasts with the broader goals of sustainable development, which emphasise community-wide engagement and the integration of sustainable practices across different social – demographic groups (Chiffoleau et al. 2019; Chiffoleau and Dourian 2020).

The Basket does not provide a platform accessible to all producers and consumers in the area, with the aim of farmers being in contact with all interested consumers (Talmage and Knopf 2017). There is a strong limitation of producers to participate. Only one – and a maximum of two – producers of each product can be allowed to join. The exclusion of competition provides a secure market for those producers who could be part of the Basket, but restricts the entry of other producers. Limiting the products and producers ensures that there is always a solvent demand and consumer for the goods produced by the participating producer. This results in a limited amount of products, which also limits the number of consumers. However, it is not only the amount of products but also the price that results in the limited participation of consumers and the limited commitment of the registered consumers as well. Ecological principles and food quality are the most important goals of the Basket. Supporting local producers and development through the creation of a local food network and strengthening direct relationships are of secondary importance. The members of the shopping community are consumers who want to learn about the production process and the benefits of buying locally grown products. They are motivated by specific values and norms associated with environmental sustainability and are also willing to pay more for it. This also indicates a higher social status (Nurse Rainbolt, Onozaka, and McFadden 2012). Participants possess the knowledge, skills and adequate economic capital to both produce and consume (DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Fourat et al. 2020; Kirwan et al. 2013). What Robert-Boeuf (2023) observed is true in our case: Urban middle-class people are the most active participants in the local food network. Free access, a key indicator of social inclusion (Hinrichs and Kremer 2002), is limited in the way the Basket operates. The group is closed and exclusive. The fact that the Basket prefers to select farmers who have moved from Budapest to the countryside, who are able to follow ecological standards and who have been recommended by some members of the community, also results in a lack of social inclusion. The limited number of consumers is not only a consequence of higher prices, but the limited number of producers and products is also an obstacle to more consumers and the development of this shopping community. This could significantly affect local sustainable development.

The over-representation of urban newcomers, both as consumers and as producers in the Basket, means that the needs and demands of the newcomers are prioritised and the role of the indigenous local population is subordinated or even excluded. This process, even if it is an initiative with a focus on sustainability, is part and parcel of rural gentrification (Phillips 1993). Furthermore, failing to

engage with the wider local population can undermine efforts to create more resilient and self-sufficient food systems that benefit all community members (Akgün et al. 2011; Janc et al. 2023; Robert-Boeuf 2023).

The basket plays a role in stimulating demand for sustainability in a rural micro-region, albeit in a somewhat limited manner, via the urban newcomers initiative (Csizmady et al. 2021). This shopping community involves not only newcomers, but also some of the local middle class. However, they only take part as occasional consumers. The regular consumers are families who used to live in the city and who want to establish their healthy, sustainable and short food chain lifestyle as part of their idyllic rural life after they have moved to the countryside.

The ideological background and the sense of community are the driving forces behind this shopping community. The fact that producers and consumers come from the same social group and have the same ideological background maintains the cohesion and functioning of this shopping community. The sense of community is very important for the commitment of both the consumers and the producers. The basket as a shopping community supports small-scale, ecologically sustainable agriculture, albeit on a small scale, and serves as an facilitator of idyllic rural agriculture. The Basket as a shopping community is an important civil society organisation in the micro-region and participates in civil society networks and in particular in sustainability-oriented networks. Although the general objective of a shopping community to support local producers and to strengthen the local community is not fully achieved.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide a critical assessment of the role of high-status newcomers from urban areas in the practice of sustainable food production and consumption in rural areas. It looked at how and by whom a shopping community was initiated, and how its aims and operational practices might support or hinder the development of sustainable consumption practices, sustainable agriculture and also the building of community in rural society. The potential advantages and disadvantages of the organisation of a shopping community by urban newcomers have also been under consideration. Through in-depth analysis, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which small, bottom-up communities – led by urban newcomers – can hinder or support wider efforts to achieve rural sustainability.

Our overall aim was to examine the role of small shopping communities, particularly their place in local society and their impact on sustainable production and consumption, and the local food network, in the context of the restructuring of rural society.

Basket's founder wanted to create a community-based initiative like a shopping community, which did not exist in the area before. This contributes to spreading the principles of sustainability. At the same time, the implementation format can be seen as gentrification rather than a socially inclusive initiative at this point in Basket's development.

There is a great need for such initiatives as shopping communities in the countryside. This is especially true in regions further away from metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, Basket's operating model has several limitations. Prices do not match the average purchasing power of the population. The limited number of producers cannot consistently meet weekly demand, even for regular customers, and does not encourage the participation of additional consumers and producers and the development of a consumer-producer network.

Our research has revealed signs of rural gentrification within the Basket community, where the most active and regular members are high-status newcomers or indigenous residents with a higher social status who have informal links with the organisers. This exclusivity, despite the Basket's general aim of developing the local community, prevents the Basket from reaching out to average customers and the wider local society. This discrepancy between the founder's commitment and the operational model highlights a fundamental problem: while the objective of promoting sustainability in a local rural community is fundamental, the chosen instrument cannot fully

achieve it. The structure of the shopping community and the process of participation inadvertently limit wider participation and inclusivity. They contribute to rural gentrification.

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