

Exploring foodservice perspective of regionalized food supply chains in Slovakia

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In recent decades, effectively managing food systems has emerged as a prominent global challenge amidst the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, soil degradation, declining water quality, and heightened prevalence of unhealthy diets (Rockström et al., 2020). The short food supply chains represent an alternative paradigm to the conventional global supply chains within the context of agro-food systems. This approach is characterized by localized and direct transactions between producers and consumers, bypassing the extensive networks and intermediaries often associated with traditional global supply chains. These systems involve direct sales from farmers to consumers or local retailers within close geographical proximity (Bakos, 2017).

Despite limitations in replacing global food systems, short food supply chains exhibit manifold benefits. Local food systems address urban challenges related to access to fresh and high-quality foods. Socially, short food supply chains bolster interaction, trust, and cohesion, fostering community and forging relationships between production and consumption. Their impact extends to knowledge enhancement, prompting behavioural changes. Notably, they play a vital role in building trust and connections between producers and consumers. A key rationale for supporting localized chains alongside global value chains in the agro-food complex is the environmental contribution of local food systems. This contribution encompasses soil protection, biodiversity conservation, and efforts to address challenges linked to climate change (Edwards-Jones et al., 2008). Economically, local food systems positively affect local economies by augmenting income and employment (Aguiar, 2018; Falguieres, 2015). These systems provide rural farmers opportunities for economic diversification, contributing to income growth, improved living standards, and innovation in organizational, process, and product/service realms. Innovations may extend to diverse activities, influencing tourism development and enhancing territorial image. In urban settings, the emergence of food communities or health-oriented interest groups capitalizes on fresh food accessibility (FAAN, 2010). Consumer benefits within short food supply chains include crucial information acquisition and motivation driven by product quality (Stanco et al., 2019; Lombardi et al., 2015).

In these regionalized systems, foodservice sector can serve as a pivotal intersection, as it is able to generate increased interest in local food among customers, as well as farmers and potential distributors. They are capable of eliciting greater interest in local foods among their customers, as well as farmers and potential distributors. There are often key places in the network associated with the development of secondary activities of gastronomic tourism, agro tourism and adventure tourism (Laginová et al., 2023). Various studies in the scientific literature address identified advantages and disadvantages associated with the procurement of local foods by food service establishments. Authors consider supporting the local economy and community, fresher and safer foods, excellent product taste, positive public relations, and greater customer satisfaction as the main advantages (Dougherty et al., 2013) Other advantages include the ability to purchase smaller quantities, reducing transportation and energy costs, knowledge of the origin and production methods of products, natural food quality, cost savings, and environmental benefits derived from shorter distances between farms and restaurants (Khan and Prior, 2010).

Conversely, disadvantages for food service establishments when purchasing local foods directly from farmers may include low awareness of local sources, seasonality and limited availability, long order processing times, inconsistent logistical capacity, collaboration with multiple suppliers, packaging size, safety concerns, and a lack of established networks between restaurants and local farmers. In the distribution system between the farmer and gastronomic business, an intermediary often intervenes

to address some of the aforementioned challenges associated with direct distribution (Paciarotti, Torregiani, 2018).

The views and attitudes of restaurant operators regarding the role of intermediaries facilitating the distribution of local foods were investigated by Roy and Ballantine (2020) in selected locations in Canada and New Zealand.

In the context of Slovakia, the engagement of food service establishments in short food supply chains represents a social innovation with the potential to provide benefits to a broad spectrum of stakeholders. However, in Slovakia, this pertains to an unexplored subject. Only sporadic and undocumented instances of alternative food networks are available, lacking in-depth exploration, and there is a notable absence of knowledge regarding the involvement of foodservice sector in these networks.

This article investigates the dynamics and implications of regionalized food supply chains within the context of foodservice establishments in Slovakia. The research questions are formulated as follows:

1. To what extent and how are food service establishments are engaged in regional and local food systems in the conditions of Slovakia?
2. What is the organisational model and structure of short food supply chains in which food service establishments participate?
3. What motivates food service establishments to engage in these structures, and how are short food supply chains perceived in terms of social, economic, and environmental benefits?
4. What are the barriers for food service establishments to engage in alternative food networks?

The analysed data was acquired through an online questionnaire survey distributed to 3,876 food service establishments in Slovakia. The contact information for these establishments was obtained from a publicly available online database of food service establishments. The semi-structured questionnaire was designed to gather detailed information on short food supply chain utilization, the nature of these networks, and the motivations and barriers associated with their engagement. Open-ended questions are included to allow respondents to share detailed narratives about their engagement, cooperative structures, motivations, and perceived benefits and issues. The questionnaire consists of four sections. The first part includes identification details of the gastronomic establishment (e.g. their location, capacity, number of employees, culinary focus) and a characterization of their services (target groups, communication with clients). In the second section, data on input quality and the structure of existing suppliers are gathered (criteria for selecting food suppliers, the share of suppliers from global supply chains, the share of regional food suppliers, the range of commodities supplied by Slovak suppliers, logistics). The third section of the questionnaire investigates whether the food service establishment has experience purchasing local foods, the form of food deliveries, and involvement of the establishment in various short food supply chain schemes, perceived benefits and barriers perceived by the establishment of participating in a short food supply chain. The final section of the questionnaire assesses the hypothetical interest of gastronomic establishments in purchasing local foods based on various alternatives (commodities, distance and delivery method, price, intermediary).

Quantitative and qualitative methodology is applied. The qualitative approach is chosen to identify overarching themes and sub-themes related to the utilization, motivations, barriers, and perceived benefits of short food supply chains. It allows us to capture the context-specific experiences that emerge from the participants perspectives. Quantitative methods are utilized to compare and contrast qualitative narratives with quantitative trends to provide a comprehensive understanding on the

extent of the engagement of food service facilities in short food supply chains, the cooperative structures shaping these supply chains, and the motivations driving participation.

The research provides insights into the unique characteristics of short supply chain within the Slovakian context and by proposing recommendations for policymakers, businesses and other stakeholders, mainly for improving these structures and reaching more consumers. At the same time, we confront the results of our research conducted in the conditions of Slovakia with the outcomes of case studies from countries where local food networks are well-developed, specifically those involving gastronomic establishments.

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