

Consumers motivations for buying local and organic products in developing vs developed countries

Sirieix, L.1, P. Kledal, L. Santiago de Abreu

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Abstract

Despite numerous studies reporting on organic consumer profiles, little is known on consumers motivations for buying local and organic products. More precisely, do consumers prefer local products because they want to support local producers or do environment and the question of food miles matter in their choice ? Besides, very little is known about organic consumers in developing countries, since most surveys are generally conducted in developed countries. Our purpose is to fill this double gap. By conducting qualitative surveys based on individual interviews in four developing countries (Brazil, Egypt, Uganda and China) and two European countries, France and Denmark, we plan to study consumers choice for organic products from supermarkets, farmers markets or local organic food network respectively. Products are selected to cover examples of imported organic products that compete with comparable products of local origin.

First results from Brazil and France show that French consumers are more concerned by the environment than Brazilian consumers, but that most consumers in both samples are not concerned by food miles and their subsequent environmental impacts. Results also shed light on different patterns related to commitment of supporting small or local farmers, and suggest implications for policy makers.

Introduction

The double situation on the one hand of increased demand for organic food and belief in Organic Food and Farming as a development pathway, and, on the other hand, the increased conventionalisation and globalisation of Organic Food and Farming, is the starting point for the Global Organic research project GLOBALORG (www.globalorg.dk). Four case studies in developing countries (Brazil, China, Uganda, Egypt) will be compared to two case studies in Europe: France and Denmark.

The objective of GlobalOrg project is to study the urban economic factors influencing consumer preferences respectively for short versus long procurement systems supplying organic food in developed and developing countries.

The project consists of three tasks:

- (1) To document the urban socio-economic development of the chosen areas
- (2) to document the various organic food procurement networks and
- (3) to study consumers motivations and barriers to buy, and meaning of, organic food.

¹ Corresponding author [sirieix\[a\]supagro.inra.fr](mailto:sirieix[a]supagro.inra.fr)

This article presents some results from the third task, with a focus on consumers motivations for buying local and organic products in Brazil and France respectively.

Materials and methods

Individual interviews were conducted in each country, with 25 consumers in Brazil, and 28 consumers in France, who buy organic products from farmers markets, supermarkets or local organic food network. Products were selected to cover examples of imported organic products that compete with comparable products of local origin.

More precisely, interviewees had to compare a local and organic food product, a local and conventionally produced food product, and an imported organic food product. They had to

- (1) answer questions related to their attitudes and consumption intention (related to environment, health, price,..),
- (2) describe the person who typically buys and consumes each type of product
- (3) describe the person who never buys or consumes each type of product,
- (4) react after reading a discussion between three invented consumers (one who buys local or imported organic food, regardless of the mode of distribution or length of the distribution chain, the second one who only buys local and organic products and prefers not to buy them in supermarkets and, the third one who buys conventionally produced local products),
- (5) discuss on the basis of open questions about food miles, mode of distribution, and producers.

Results

In the French sample, local organic food is highly appreciated. However, the invented consumer who prefers not to buy them in supermarkets is the least appreciated profile. On the contrary, the invented consumer who prefers organic food, and does not pay attention to the fact that it is local or imported, is the most appreciated profile by most consumers. Most respondents do not see major differences between locally grown and imported organic food as regard to environment.

However, two kinds of attitudes are noteworthy within the sample. First, according to some respondents, buying imported organic food is necessary since tropical products such as bananas cannot be produced in France. Others explain their consumption of imported organic food by the fact that the products are both organic and fair trade products. So the respondents described consumers who buy imported organic food as both environmentally conscious, but also involved in the support of small producers in poor countries. When we stressed the fact that many of organic imports to France are from the southern hemisphere countries, implying long distance transport and bad environmental effects, they answered that in that case supporting producers from poor countries is more important than preserving the environment. For example, a

consumer stated: "To me, imported organic food is fair trade food. And buying fair trade products is sharing another vision of the world."

In sum, whatever their attitudes regarding imported organic food, respondents do not really take distance and its environmental impacts into account. Even for organic consumers who declare to be environmentally oriented, food miles do not really matter, since organic consumers regard themselves as making a trade-off between food miles and other product attributes.

In Brazil, the image of local product is very strong: Brazilians are proud of their local tropical products, and do not see the use of imported products, apart from some processed food. They think 1), foreign products are too expensive 2) they do not like them because they think that transportation can lead to a loss of product quality, and 3) they do not trust foreign products. One respondent added that it seems snobbish to buy unnecessary imported products.

Some Brazilian interviewees also describe the consumption of local organic products as a political and ethical act. They are in the same time part of producers associations and actively support organic producers. Most Brazilian interviewees do not seem aware of nor concerned by Food miles; only one respondent spontaneously mentioned food miles and the consequences of transportation on environment.

Discussion

In both samples interviewees express their preference for local and organic products, for different reasons: Brazilian respondents do not trust foreign organic products and therefore reject them. French interviewees are less reluctant to buy organic imported products. Environmental concerns seem more important in the French sample than in Brazil, where the consumers emphasized the closeness and support of local organic producers. However, in both samples the interviewees do not take into account pollution due to transportation, and only one consumer in each sample spontaneously spoke of food miles. This result is consistent with results from a previous study on consumers of conventional food products in France, who do not care about food miles (Sirieix et al., 2007).

Finally, support of organic and local Southern producers were for both the Brazilian and French interviewees a common motivation.

The differences between countries may be explained by the following points:

First of all, in Brazil there is still no state regulation or a Brazilian brand for organic food products. It is left to a wide range of local and/or internationally accredited certifiers, to guarantee that the products are following the rules of organic production methods. This could have an influence on the question of trust as well as on knowledge towards organic products from abroad.

Secondly, Brazil is a huge country so the question or notion of 'local' is different from its perception in France; this notion has to be specified in next surveys.

Thirdly, in Brazil organic food products sold through supermarkets are fairly new and very expensive compared to organic products sold through box-schemes, farmers markets or direct at farm shops. The consumers interviewed do not have a comparable choice between different outlets as in Europe.

On a theoretical level, the impacts of the findings of this study mainly relate to

- the links between personal values and behaviour (Wier et al., 2006), individual values, altruistic values (benevolence and universalism) and the related question of consumer reflexivity (Giddens, 1991). For example, in Brazil, imported organic food is more rejected than in France, but in both samples, consumer concerns and internal conflicts are linked to both individual and altruistic values: some French consumers are willing to buy organic imported products such as bananas because they like them (individual value of pleasure), and others because they think that buying fair trade organic products allow them to support small producers from developing countries (altruistic value). Some Brazilian consumers reject organic imported food because they think the quality is lower (individual value of pleasure), and others because they want to support Brazilian organic producers (altruistic value).
- the links between local and/or organic consumption and social embeddedness. This relation is connected to the values of social mobilization for sustainable agriculture (Moreno-Penaranda, 2006) and the role local organic food networks can play in this regard (Seyfang, 2006).

Implications for public policy and marketing of local and organic products are important. Using an environmental argument such as 'food miles' to support certain supply channels may not generate the expected results as shown by our empirical investigation. In our survey, Brazilian consumers do not pay attention to food miles, but buy in local organic network to support small farmers and local economy, incorporating localisation, community-building and collective action as anticipated by Seyfang (2006).

Obviously our study is exploratory in nature, due to our limited sample size at this stage. The results should therefore be considered as a first step in a broad survey.

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