



PRACTICE ABSTRACT NR. 68

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Challenges of direct marketing for farmers at some distance from consumers living in large cities

PROVE is a programme launched in 2006 by a Local Action Group (LAG) nearby the Lisbon conurbation to enable farmers to self-manage collaborative arrangements for selling farm products directly to urban consumers. Development and self-management of short food supply chains help small farmers attaining socioeconomic sustainability. LAG's successful example was replicated in other Portuguese regions. In the Tâmega-e-Sousa region, in the North-western Portugal, 50 to 75 km away from Porto, with the support of regions' LAGs, a number of farmer PROVE groups were launched between 2008 and 2012. Groups of 4 to 5 farmers weekly filled boxes with seasonal vegetables and fruits from their farms, and directly delivered them to Porto consumers in pre-defined spots. Challenges to the groups' cohesion rapidly emerged, including the lack of a group-owned van, forcing the farmers that owned vans to provide the means of transportation, thus creating uneven work division and dissatisfaction. The limited diversity of seasonal farm products also raised dissatisfaction among consumers. This illustrates how, regarding social innovation, short-supply chains lack advisory support and how small-scale farmers that are relatively distant from large urban areas might not be able to sustain self-managed direct marketing initiatives due to excessive burden on farmers. Institutional arrangements, such as bottom-up cooperatives or similar organisational figures, bringing together farmers and consumers, could be an option. Incentives to formalised collaborative initiatives involving marketing and organisation innovation could make a difference in the success of short supply food chains by addressing identified challenges.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The failure of “PROVE boxes” scheme in this region caches success stories that show the initiative was a fruitful experience for collective learning amongst small-scale familiar producers. More specialised producers, often young farmers, have realised they could be successful by reorienting its direct selling towards restaurants and gourmet shops. Other small farmers, often part-time ones, took advantage of learning with whom they could easily cooperate to maintain the PROVE “logo” and enhance the “boxes” quality and diversity to please those loyal customers they had conquered. Hence, new initiatives can emerge empowered by the learned lessons. A key lesson is that customers need to be both strongly engaged and part of these collaborative arrangements. If producers are enabled to co-innovate with their customers they will be able to customise fresh fruits & vegetables delivers and diversify the baskets by adding other foods. How can these co-producing schemes be enhanced to involve multiple producers? Specific advisory support is required, encompassing skilled and trusted facilitators. Farmers need to be alleviated of the excessive burden of direct selling. Finally and fundamentally, there are are loyal customers who are willing to do the extra-effort of engaging with farmers in exchange for having fresher and safe foods together with a more sustainable FoodPrint.



ABOUT AGRILINK

Agrilink is a multi-actor project funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. It brings together 16 partners from 13 countries, including universities, applied research institutes, advisors and consultants from public organisations, private SMEs, a farmer-based organisation and specialists in communication and distance learning.

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