

# A Case Study on the Role of Farmers' Markets in the Process of Shortening the Food Chain and the Possible Economic Benefits for Consumers

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## Abstract

*In recent years, farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs have been striving to search for the most profitable markets, but the generalized increase of the price level, due to the difficult international economic situation, has generated the need to create alternative distribution channels with respect to those ones which have been traditionally employed in the marketing of food products. All this affects the production and consumption practises, enhances the attention of the media and of policy-makers, stimulates the localization of transformation processes and the reorientation towards quality products and the short supply chain. Therefore, the aim of the present work is to analyse the short supply chain distribution channel and to highlight how this marketing model may become an opportunity that the "conscious consumer" can exploit. Indeed, he can reorganize his purchase and consumption habits in order to direct his preference to food and agri-food products which own certain quality requirements that are different from those commonly recognised by the average consumer. Moreover, through this work, we intend to highlight the positive economies that the short supply-chain can offer to small and medium-sized companies. This channel enables the conscious consumer to approach himself to his own land, thus improving his knowledge of local products and producers. The results of the survey carried out in the city of Messina have shown that the advantages given by the short supply chain, with respect to the large-scale distribution are: a lower price of consumer products thanks to the removal of the costs linked to intermediation and distribution; the removal of many intermediaries which has reduced negative externalities (environmental costs); a better traceability of products; a fairer compensation to producers; the valorization and reevaluation of the territory and a better possibility of purchasing healthy, biological and seasonal products.*

**Keywords:** farmers' markets, short supply-chain, direct sales, consumer prices, analysis of consumer preferences, farmer.

## 1. Introduction: research objectives<sup>1</sup>

The main objective of this work is to analyse firstly the reasons why the short supply-chain phenomenon the last years has become the protagonist of a dashing development and the object of an active scientific and political debate of which the public opinion is increasingly aware. More specifically, the work is focused on the further detailed study of the Farmers' Markets phenomenon, which represent a case of considerable relevance not only from an economic point of view, but above all for the leading role that they can play in representing and spreading the key principles which characterize the short supply-chain and distinguish them from the other forms of distribution. Short supply-chain substantially means "direct sales" by agricultural producers without intermediations and direct access to the final market, in which not only the consumer but also other types of interlocutors become subjects with whom the agricultural company directly interacts (D'Amico M., *et al.*, 2014). It therefore means lower final costs of the product thanks to the removal of intermediate steps, first of all the one represented by wholesale markets, which increasingly impose too high usage costs for agricultural companies, while the large-scale distribution often demands purchase prices which are unacceptable since they are too little profitable (Popescu G., 2013). Short supply-chains are therefore characterised by the absence of intermediaries between producers and consumers and, additionally, by the local dimension of production, transformation and marketing (Annunziata A., *et al.*, 2010). The advent of the short supply-chains is an

expanding phenomenon, and the approach adopted to describe these alternative forms of marketing is primarily a geographic and sociological one, also due to the intrinsically contextual nature of the phenomenon and to the poor availability of quantitative data, and employs case studies and exploratory surveys on local realities (Fehér I., 2007). In the latter case, the short supply-chain coincides with the c.d. "direct sales", which is the most concrete marketing form of short supply-chain in which the consumer or other types of interlocutors, such as restaurateurs and public services, become subjects with whom the agricultural company interacts without other steps (Fonte M., 2013. Tanku A., *et al.*, 2013). The most widespread forms of short supply-chain, apart from e-commerce and catalogue sales are direct sales in the company, farmer's markets, weekly deliveries to families under subscription (box schemes), sales through Solidarity purchasing groups (GAS), Organized groups of distribution (GODO); collection of products directly in the fields (pick-your-own), raw milk distributors, supplies to the HoReCa circuit (hotels, restaurants, caravansaries), consumer cooperatives, the new modalities of association between producers and consumers (CSA) (Brunori G., *et al.*, 2012). The shortening of the distances between production and consumption, up to the direct contact (and to the direct communication) between producer and consumer, enables the latter, thanks to the acquired information, to his personal knowledge and to the stability of the same people and purchase points, to make more conscious choices, for example, with respect to the use of agricultural practises with a low environmental impact or to the adoption of a traditional recipe in the

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food preparation (Diana B., and Diaconu A., 2011). Nowadays from this experience it is possible to find farmers' markets in some countries such as France, Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland and Australia, where they have already been active for years. Even if different, in reflecting the food consumption tastes and models typical of each nation, they present some common elements: the weekly basis of most of the markets, the limited provenance radius of the products, the presence of supervisory bodies in order to check the quality and provenance of the sold products and of associations which protect and enhance the rural economy, the organization of cultural activities and of food and cooking education, a strongly fidelized demand which ensures a continual public in time to the market (Burda A., 2013. Polimeni J.M., et al., 2014).

## 2. The short supply-chain as a means of bringing down consumer prices

In recent years farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs have been striving to search for the most profitable markets, but the generalized increase of the price level, due to the difficult economic situation that the world is living, has generated the need to create alternative distribution channels with respect to those ones which have been traditionally employed in the marketing of food products (Broll U., et al., 2013. Sekovska B., et al., 2012). These alternatives, which have in common the shortening of the distances between producers and consumers (named for this reason short supply-chain, short circuit or direct sales), are aimed at mitigating the increase in prices, which is recorded along the product's distribution chain, and at reducing the presence of imbalances, which are linked to the scarcity of information, in exchange relationships (Cembalo L., et al., 2013). Therefore, the objective of the short supply-chain is that of favouring the meeting between consumers and producers by facilitating the direct sales, for the purpose of allowing the reduction of the number of intermediaries and of the goods' routes, whose final distribution occurs in the same production area (Dobre R., et al., 2014. Soni G. and Kodali R., 2012). In short circuits, the agricultural product acquires a meaning which goes beyond that of simple consumer goods, indeed, it is credited with a strong relational value which is related, for example, to belonging, solidarity and conviviality (Burghilea C.O., and Burghilea C., 2014). For small farmers, the short supply-chain could prove to be a winning strategy in relation to the repositioning on the market, because it would give them the chance of becoming competitors of the companies operating in large-scale distribution, which has established itself owing to the food products' globalization processes, that have marginalized many production systems, thus making small-scale activities unsustainable (Burda A., and Chirimbu S., 2014. Timmons D. and Wang Q., 2010). Therefore, the short supply chain would represent a method to alienate the concentration of economic power from the great links of the agro-food chain to return it to agricultural producers and to consumers, in order to pursue the integration between the world of production and that of consumption, thus shifting the attention from the global to the local (Aubry C., and Kebir L., 2013). According to many, the advantages related to the short channel can be grouped in two macro-categories, thus distinguishing them in economic and socio-cultural ones (Gorton M., et al., 2014). The economic factors include: the higher revenues obtained by reducing the number of steps along the supply-chain; the demand's stability; the possibility of directly affecting the price; the reduction of the price charged to the consumer; the lower environmental impact linked to the shorter distance between the product's production and consumption and to the reduction of wastes residues related to packaging; the valorization of the territory through the direct sales of local agro-food products; the greater transparency through which the consumer manages to be informed on the price formation (Di Trapani A.M., et al., 2014). The socio-cultural ones can be attributable to the direct relationship which is established between consumers and

agricultural companies, that leads to an opportunity to recover the contact with the rural world, which is often forgotten, in a re-discovery of the rural culture, in the safeguard of local traditions and in the fight against the rural exodus (Burny P., Debode F., 2013). However, it is undeniable that these experiences are playing an increasingly important role in the agricultural and agri-food scene on a global level, carving out increasingly significant market spaces (Burghilea C.O., et al., 2013). These forms of marketing acquire different configurations on the basis of the promoters, of the management and organization modalities and of the underlying ideals (Ahmad N., et al., 2013. Jang W. and Klein C.M., 2011).

## 3. Farmers' Markets

Farmers' Markets are markets in which only local products are commercialized and which offer to the territory's small producers the opportunity to sell directly to consumers the agricultural products coming from their companies, thus avoiding the intermediate steps of wholesalers and of the big distribution chains. In its concrete and real expression the market appears to be not only the meeting place between the agricultural producer-entrepreneur's supply and the consumer citizens' demand, but it generates a "direct", unique and particular link between the consumer and the farmer. Farmers' Markets are born and developed in order to distinguish themselves from the so-called "long supply-chain" which is characterized by the presence of one or more operators between the agricultural producer and the final consumer (Cirstea A.C., and Dobre R., 2013). At the current stage the short supply-chain is being rediscovered for the importance of the direct relationship between those who produce and those who purchase. The farmer's market, as well as ensuring a fairer price and allowing people to save at least 30%, can be a social instrument and can help people rediscover the life of the fields and of the rural world (Dobre I., 2013). Therefore, the consumer must manage to save money when purchasing a qualitatively excellent product, for the purpose of respecting the principles on which the farmers' policy is based (Åseb K., et al., 2007).

In order to establish a close connection between the social conditions and the economic ones, it is appropriate that an effective and an efficient model of "farmer's market" is developed, respecting some rules which are non-binding from a regulatory point of view, but which are essential for the proper functioning and the good outcome of the markets. Indeed, the farmer's market must: be organized by professional bodies or by some associations of the farmer's market established in simple form, locally, by producer farmers; take place in the same area and at least once a week (usually on Saturday or Sunday), since longer times create logistical problems to producers, who are forced to take almost the whole product to the usual markets, thus demotivating its presence in the farmer's market; be organized also in an itinerant form in order to be able to be periodically present in fields different from the ordinary place and in any case always in the provincial territory; be the territory's expression, proposing only typical and traditional products; be the expression of those farmers who cooperatively promote the sales both through specific associations of that farmer's market also linked to trade associations and even by those administrations which have managed and supported its launch; be "constituted" by producer companies, preferably located as closely as possible to the market and must ordinarily have a seasonal nature. By respecting these principles, the farmer's markets gain the support of the consumers, who see benefits and advantages which are not only economic, but also play and social. Indeed, it is possible to add to savings the consumers' pleasure, once a week or when they wish, of having a walk downstairs, or in a farmer's market in the nearby towns, in a place where only seasonal products of agricultural farms are sold, with the presence of true farmers, where the smells and flavours of the rural farm are perceivable and tangible, where it is possible to recall the tastes of food traditions (Dobre R., Cirstea A.C., 2013).

## 4. Materials and methods: a case study on the purchasing habits in Farmer's Markets

The analysis, which aims at assessing the economic impact and the consumers' purchasing habits, has been carried out in two markets in the agricultural area of Sicily, the first one located in the city of Messina, and the second one in the municipality of Rometta marea, which is located 20 km from the city of Messina (Lanfranchi M., *et al.*, 2014). The collection of the data and information which were necessary to the survey has been carried out in the period between April and September 2014. The methodology followed to conduct the survey was a qualitative and casual one. The casual survey is referred to the identification of the paramount factors from which the choice of the consumer's purchase channel derives. The members of the research group have previously outlined and developed the research hypothesis, identified the survey's questions and structured a questionnaire to be directed to the sample of consumers through the face to face methodology, which is wide-spread in the economic-agrarian literature. In order to grasp the complexity of the issues, we intended to bring out the different shades of meaning from the consumers' tales themselves, on the basis of a critical purchase (Lanfranchi M., *et al.*, 2014). More specifically, 1.000 interviews have been conducted, taking account of the list of Farmer's Markets which are present in the territory. The survey, as mentioned earlier, has been carried out in two "Campagna Amica" markets, located in the city of Messina and in the municipality of Rometta marea:

- in Piazza del Popolo (Messina), on Sundays from 7:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.;
- in Corso della Libertà (Rometta marea) on Sundays from 7:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

The interview, directed with the support of a questionnaire composed of ten single and multiple choice questions, has been conducted trying to respect on one hand a minimum structuring, and on the other hand trying to ensure a maximum flexibility, in order to let the respondent feel free to express himself. The goal was that of understanding the real reasons underlying this choice through an individual and completely destructured path, which nonetheless has not led the respondent outside the field of survey. The interviewed consumers are mostly regular customers of the involved Farmer's Markets (Lanfranchi M., *et al.*, 2014). The made purchases are obviously complementary to the supply in other shops. The interview has been structured by taking account of four key concepts (*items*):

1. *Motivational aspects;*
2. *Relational aspects;*
3. *Political and environmental aspects;*
4. *Link with the territory.*

Therefore, the intent was that of analysing the purchasing behaviours of those families falling within the area of investigation, in order to understand how these types of choices move and are oriented in a territory which, despite being classified as an urban area, shows, however, the demographic, social and economic signs which are typical of rural areas and presents a close relationship with the territory (Lazăr M., and Lazăr C., 2011).

## 5. Analysis and interpretation of results

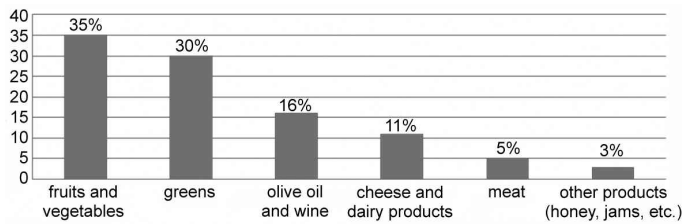
The socio-anagraphic characteristics represent a first scope of definition with respect to the survey's emerging data and have the objective of tracing a prototype of consumer who habitually attends and purchases in the Farmer's Markets in the city of Messina (Lanfranchi M., *et al.*, 2014).

The sample is composed for 67% of women and for 33% of men. This data shows a markedly higher presence of the female figure at the time of purchase. In most cases it is the woman the one who deals with shopping, who pays more attention to nutrition, who is committed to bring healthy and fresh products to

the table, even though the male sample is moving in the same direction. As regards the age range, the interviewed panel is divided as follows: 53% is 61 years of age or over, 29% belongs to the age range 31- 60 and the lowest percentage is of 18% among youths aged between 18 and 30. The highest data seem to refer to the people aged between 31 and 60, and over 61. They are the subjects who are more attentive to purchases and more inclined to the direct sales. The "most mature" consumers search for healthy and genuine foods and try through the contact with the producer to look back over and rediscover their link with the territory, with childhood, with rurality, and to reinforce their memories through the search for products suitable for the preparation of recipes and dishes that cannot be legitimized due to their poor traceability in the large-scale distribution. Moreover, especially the "over 60" have more spare time to dedicate to their psychophysical wellness. The last personal data is referred to the professional position. The farmer's market appears to be attended for 30% by pensioners, for 24% by housewives, for 22% by civil servants, followed by a 13% represented by freelance professionals, while the lowest data is referred to unemployed and students, respectively at 5% and 6%. In the light of the obtained results, it is possible to trace a profile of those consumers who employ the short supply-chain distribution channel. It is possible to enclose this type of consumers in a key-word, which can be included in the category of the so-called *traditionalists*. Nonetheless, youths are increasing and seem to be slowly approaching to these new purchasing practices. The farmer's market is an ancient phenomenon for tradition and new for structuring, inside which consumers seems to adapt themselves to a clear and explicit tendency to tradition that paradoxically emerges as innovation. The availability of fresh foods outside their seasonality and the habit of finding on the doorstep products which come from the remotest corners of the world at affordable prices has long been perceived by the consumer as an important service, as a new opportunity that enhanced his purchasing power. The most common answer to the question "how have you become aware of farmer's markets?" has been the word-of-mouth (60%), the respondents, indeed, have declared that they became acquainted with the existence of weekly markets and of fixed structures through the advice of their friends, relatives and colleagues who had been attending them for longer and who were satisfied with the purchases, but above all with the relationship of trust with the producer. The word-of-mouth can be useful but on the basis there must be personal reasons, especially in order to keep a long lasting contact. The second means which has brought a good part of consumers close to farmers' market (17%) is advertising: brochures, leaflets, sponsorship campaigns. Most of the Farmers' Markets present in Sicily region join Coldiretti's *Campagna Amica* network, which in specific periods organizes advertising campaigns aimed at promoting and encouraging the direct sales. A key role has been played also by producers, who are the true protagonists of the direct sales. Indeed, a quite modest number of people (13%) states that it was the agricultural producer the one who recommended them to buy the goods in that structure. Those agricultural producers who have been selling their products for years in the large-scale distribution and to friends and to their closest acquaintances, thanks to the new direct sales regulation, can often make their voice heard, thus reassessing their professions. Finally, 10% of the respondents declares that they have become aware of this channel in a casual way or because they were on the way or for their proximity to their home and/or working area. Among the food products' purchasing channels, the main ones are supermarkets and hypermarkets (39%), followed by the purchase in Farmer's Markets (34%) and traditional workshops (22%). Finally, the GAS purchasing channel, however, proves to be still little known and exploited (8%). The choice among the different purchasing channels is followed by a series of reasons. First of all, the supply which is concentrated in one single place (supermarkets/hypermarkets – 36 %). The product's freshness (23%) and its convenience are instead the main reasons of the purchase in Farmer's Markets. Lastly, only 6% state that they choose this purchasing channel for a convenience factor, that is to say the proximity to their place of residence or of work. Among the principle products, the most purchased in Farmer's

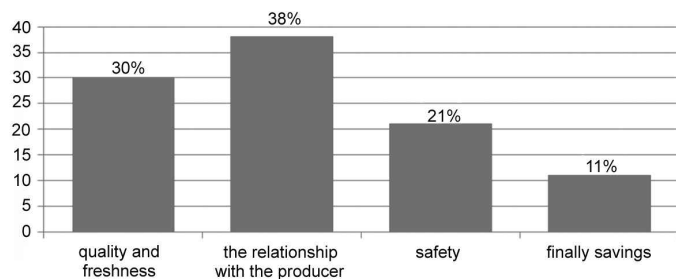


Markets are fruit, vegetables (35%) and mixed vegetables (30%) followed by some products such as oil and wine (16%), cheeses and dairy food (11%) and a modest share of meat (5%), and other products such as marmalades and honey (3%) – *Graphic 1.*



**Graphic 1. Main products purchased**  
Source: our elaboration

Among the reasons that push consumers to purchase products directly by the producer, there are: quality and freshness (30%), the relationship with the producer (38%), safety (21%) and finally savings (11%) – *Graphic 2.*



**Graphic 2. Reasons of purchase**  
Source: our elaboration

In a period of serious nutritional crisis almost half of the sample opts for the products' quality and freshness, because these latter ones have generated some feelings of distrust. In order to confirm the data on the purchasing choice, the respondents have been asked to declare the reason why they would recommend to attend a Farmer's Market. The main answer was quality and traceability (40%), followed by the face to face relationship (33%), environmental protection (15%) and the cultural and social experience (12%). The short supply-chain has the aim of bringing the consumer closer to the product's "source" and this tends to naturalize an economic process, like the exchange of goods (Lanfranchi M., and Giannetto C., 2014). The attentive and responsible consumers are sensitive to the information on the products and do not represent targets of advertising campaigns and marketing strategies, but appear to be truly interested in knowing the environmental impact of the goods that they intend to purchase. The 65% of the sample argues that the purchasing operation in a Farmer's Market, if protracted, can reduce the problem related to environmental pollution. The 20% of consumers does not see any connections between local purchasing and global environmental issues, while the 15% does not give an answer in this sense. The growing unsustainability of urban concentrations and atmospheric pollution, force to make choices that can no longer be postponed, which involve customs as well. A crucial issue is that of rethinking and consequently predicting the way foods must be produced, through a model of sustainability, by activating less energy consumption for transport and bringing the places of production closer to those of the consumption of the food itself. Those people who are endowed with a particularly marked ecological sensitivity are pushed to rethink about their life-style starting with the nutritional one and directing themselves towards different consumption, ethical, critical and sustainable models (Dobre I., and Pantilie A.-M., 2014). A particular life-style does not become self-referential, but is interpreted also as a proof and civil act aimed at providing a

contribution, while symbolic, to the change of the dominant development models. This is an attitude able to prevent or limit the social and environmental risks of the current model. The modernization process has generated unexpected consequences on nature and society and this may have some effects and retroactions which risk to make any social insurance system complex. For most of the interviewed people, the defence of the environment is not a mere orientation principle. Nature is no longer a hostile force to be protected against, but it has become a good to safeguard. From the first steps of civilization to nowadays, we have made an improvement, at first slow, then increasingly accelerated, in the same direction: that of an overthrow of the man/nature relationship, of a progressive alienation from the latter, of an increasingly greater exploitation of natural resources (Sgroi F., et al., 2014). Only in the last decades a syndrome that could be defined as ecologically sensitiveness is starting to spread. The awareness that by alienating himself from nature man distances himself even from his own roots is developing, and this causes unpredictable consequences. In the final phase of the survey the consumers were asked what they would change in Farmers' Market and if, in their opinions, this sales channel is sufficiently known. According to most of the respondents (60%), the main problem on which to intervene is the frequency (only once a week), followed by the small number of present producers (28%) and the location (12%), which according to many is not sufficiently central and above all devoid of parking spaces. Lastly, little more than half of the respondents (55%) declares that Coldiretti's Campagna Amica initiative is sufficiently known in the city, while 45% states that it is little known (Lanfranchi M., et al., 2014).

## 6. Conclusions and discussions

In the light of what has emerged, we can conclude our observation by stating that the different consumption initiatives and experiences that are arising in the last years are due to the fact that consumers are increasingly more aware of the strength of their purchasing power, and when dealing with goods that are impossible to identify for their provenance and quality, they prove themselves to be each day more attentive to the purchased products' reliability, from the point of view of man's health itself, of environmental protection, of the respect of men's and workers' rights (Pfeifer C., et al., 2012). In order to respond to the needs of nature, justice and welfare, consumers are experimenting new ways that range from fair trade to ethical finance, from critical consumption to local economy networks, by deciding to set some limits to their consumption independently of their economic availability. The researches carried out in the last years, although they are not exhaustive yet, have highlighted three different orders of reasons which lead consumers to rise up against the large-scale distribution system: the search for fairer human relationship through solidarity economy practises; the desire to consume safe and quality products; the need of protecting themselves and nature from negative externalities. The opacity of goods is also a result of too long and little transparent production and distribution chains. The short supply-chain allows to eliminate the many steps that determine a consequential lack of traceability of the goods, and besides, it prevents products from having a price which is disproportionate to their real value, owing to the many actors with whom they come into contact. Moreover, it enables the consumer to build direct relations with the producer, and to establish with him a relationship of trust, almost of collaboration (Lanfranchi M., and Giannetto C., 2014). These direct relations go beyond the simple economic advantage and represent stable social networks, which enhance the quality of work and the solidarity between consumer and producer. Through the short supply-chain's processes, many small agricultural and craft realities, with environmental, cultural and production characteristics, can be financed in this way without being subjected to the large-scale distribution's strict laws. Another feature of the short supply-chains is their environmental compa-

tibility (Graziano P.R., Forno F., 2012). The proximity also allows to reduce the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that are inevitably generated in transports and it also allows to eliminate the many leftover packaging which accompany a long production and distribution

supply-chain. What is more, it encourages the consumption of seasonal products, which, as well as being more tasty, do not imply the waste of energy and resources that out-of-season foods entail.

**Q-as**

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