



LOCAL FOOD SUPPLY IS NOW MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER

How Covid-19 offers possibilities to reform outdated systems

Thursday, June 11, 2020 - Bram Koppert

One noticeable shift caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is society's growing awareness of food consumption. Now more than ever, consumers realize how extraordinary it is that it's considered 'normal' to be able to buy a whole range of products from all over the world in the local supermarket, regardless of the time of year. They are spoiled, but they don't know any different. Now that some parts of the world are shut off, logistics are disrupted and some international trade has come to a standstill, people are being forced to reconsider what has previously seemed so natural; they're increasingly realizing that the import and export of fruit, vegetables and meat can't be taken for granted when a crisis like this occurs.

It is still possible to import and export products in the current situation, but one thing is certain: governments, businesses, consumers and growers have been troubled for a while. Imagine that food is no longer available on an unlimited basis and the supermarkets have to tailor their offering to what is available locally at that time. What then? These questions automatically lead us to question the current economic system. Is it really logical to import beans to the Netherlands when they are also grown in the Netherlands? And why is the industry still so concerned with breeding vegetable varieties that have a longer shelf life when we now have the technological means to grow all year round, anywhere in the world, in all weather conditions? This crisis is creating opportunities in all areas to radically change the current system.

Local food production, less pressure on healthcare

More and more governments are realizing the need for local food production and have seen how things can go wrong when society is dependent on food from overseas. In recent years, there has been insufficient focus on the production of healthy food close to where people live, which makes the current infrastructure anything but sustainable. In order to improve this, governments, local councils, architects, urban planners, entrepreneurs and private individuals must be inspired to come up with a new way of thinking – one in which urban development creates space for the production of food to feed the local population. The knife cuts both ways. Making food production ever-more sustainable results in healthier diets, which in turn means that people are stronger and less susceptible to disease. As a result, this reduces the pressure on healthcare.



De Lier (Zuid Holland, The Netherlands) is surrounded by greenhouses

Changing consumer behavior

Consumers themselves can influence a change in the current food industry. Over the past few months we've seen various examples of how this can be achieved. Dutch consumers have been supporting horticultural growers who were hit hard by the crisis by consciously buying flowers for each other and for healthcare workers. They are also supporting local clothing stores and chemists by buying supplies there. They feel extra solidarity with local businesses. The big question, of course, is whether consumers will maintain this buying behavior after the crisis. Will they still feel the need to support local businesses and pay a fair price for their products? Or will they all return to buying cheaper tomatoes from Spain or beans from Morocco, even though they know that these are also grown on Dutch soil less than 200 km away?

It is important to think about the extent to which consumers are willing to change their buying habits, because local food production means that there is no longer an unlimited supply of everything. What if bananas, avocados and mangos can no longer be imported all year round? Should the horticultural sector consider growing these types of fresh produce locally? And what are consumers willing to pay for such locally grown products?

Globalization for local food supply

Now that borders are becoming increasingly apparent and not all products can be shipped around the world as before, the horticultural sector must realize that profitability is not the only aspect. It is important that we, the industry, make choices from a business perspective. The coronavirus crisis offers the sector new prospects. Suppose that you had the opportunity – with support from banks or government as necessary – to invest again. Would you invest in the business as it stood before the crisis? Or would you invest in a business that is future-proof? Even though many growers are currently operating in survival mode, they also need to keep thinking about their business continuity after the coronavirus crisis. Is a local business abroad an option? Or should they be offering more diversity and start to grow a wider choice of products? Banks and governments play an important role in this by giving horticultural entrepreneurs the opportunity to move with the times.

Converting specialized knowledge into concrete solutions

Growers and suppliers had ideas about producing food locally before the pandemic broke out, of course. The aim to increase local food production has been around for a long time, and horticultural companies around the world are opening up local branches to gain a foothold in the market. That's not always easy, but growers nowadays benefit from better and faster support and can largely run their operation

remotely. Fewer on-site visits are necessary to provide technical support, which saves on time and transportation. The intelligent control systems help to automate people's 'green fingers' and companies can grow high-quality crops without qualified growers always having to be present. The key to success here is, without doubt, specialized knowledge. This allows data to be converted into valuable information and effective control systems that help growers to optimize their business. Without specialized knowledge, data is nothing more than a stockpile of information.

Who will take the first step?

The transition from 'unlimited availability, anytime and anywhere' to 'locally grown fresh produce' will not happen without help. Consumers can influence demand. Growers can influence supply. But who will take the first step? If growers want to initiate this change, they will have to look beyond borders to form collaborative partnerships with one another. It sounds almost paradoxical: globalizing horticulture to provide a local and sustainable food supply.

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