



Supporting collective food buying groups requires a double strategy



Collective buying groups are food distribution activities that establish a direct relationship between consumers and one or several farmers in order to provide regular food baskets to participants. If Community Supported Agriculture is the most prominent example of food buying groups, these can take different forms, from farm-consumers cooperatives to consumer associations or internet based social enterprises.

A survey carried out by a research team from Leuven University and the Université Libre de Bruxelles unveils the two facets of these groups. On the one hand, they belong to the wider social movement advocating ecological transition and are seeking to contribute to wider system changes. On the other hand, they are doing so through a **very specific type of activism, that of creating concrete alternatives** instead of protesting or lobbying. These two sides of their activity call for a different kind of support. One of the most important challenge ahead for these groups will be that of professionalization in order for them to fully deliver their potential.

Working towards social change

Collective buying groups share a common aim: going beyond the mere delivery of sustainable food. Indeed, they are seeking broader sustainability impacts, for instance, sharing value more equally with farmers or reducing food's environmental footprint.

These groups belong to a wider social movement for ecological transition. Indeed, groups that were interviewed in the survey developed specific actions to contribute to this transition on top of food delivery:

- First, by networking with organisations (such as Transition Towns) advocating for social change.
- Second, by creating spaces (members meeting, convivial events...) where participants can share informally, learn about the food system and get involved in the governance of the organisation.

Here, collective buying groups have an “educational” work to do, as [Tom Dedeurwaerdere](#), who co-authored the article, puts it. **They contribute to changing the social norm about what good food is** and how it should be produced.

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The danger of overlooking the social enterprise side of the activity

Such broader social aims should not make participants overlook the business side of their activity. Indeed, collective food buying groups bring food to people, and this has very concrete implications: production, packaging, transportation, distribution. This means finding producers, ensuring that the transportation happens on time, etc. Logistics is key, and such groups need to overcome the still weak infrastructure, low economies of scales and not so efficient distribution channels that their activity is facing.

What is different, however, from a “normal” company, is that they are a social enterprise, i.e. an organisation that puts social objectives before profit. In nowadays’ food markets where food’s environmental and social impacts are not reflected in the final price paid by consumers, **these groups are not competing on equal grounds with “for-profit” companies that “just” sell local food.** If they want to maintain, or further, their social and environmental benefits, they need to rely on specific organisational settings. For instance, yearly contracts that consumers agree to sign with the farmers, or the fact that participants give some of their time to take part in day-to-day tasks (for instance, food delivery).

In other words: they need to innovate while placed in an unfriendly environment. For Tom Dedeurwaerdere, this “social enterprise” aspect is where the challenge lies for the Belgian food buying groups they studied. This is crucial as their activity, if not strengthened, could be threatened by other actors entering the “responsible food market” but without their social enterprise component. Collective food buying groups would therefore be forced out of the market.

Towards a professionalization of collective food buying groups?

For collective food buying groups to fully contribute to social change, they therefore need to carry out both “educational” and business activities. The challenge is to be able to do both at the same time as they require different competencies, activities, partnerships... Public policies and local authorities willing to support such groups should therefore be aware that **they need two very different kind of support:**

- **First, supporting the business side of the activity.** This means bringing them technical and administrative support, and places to incubate new ideas. Here, according to Tom Dedeurwaerdere, training of social entrepreneurs is key. This could also mean providing support to umbrella organisations, as the survey showed that these groups rely to peer-to-peer learning. Action is also required at the national level, for instance, to internalise food impacts into food prices, in order to help these groups compete on an equal footing with other food businesses.
- **Second, supporting the more “educational” side of the activity,** i.e. help strengthen the governance settings that will allow the people who take part in these initiatives to link with other transition initiatives. And help these groups contribute to wider social changes.

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Source

[Dedeurwaerdere et al. 2017. " The Governance Features of Social Enterprise and Social Network Activities of Collective Food Buying Groups", Ecological Economics 140 \(2017\): 123–135](#)

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