

Defining local: the quest continues



The disconnect between producers and consumers is one driver of the increased popularity of local food. However, there is still a lack of clarity about what 'local' means. Emilia Schmitt, Dominique Barjolle, and Johan Six from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (Switzerland) tackle this in their recent paper "Assessing the degree of localness of food value chains". **The authors move away from dualistic thinking about local and global, instead identifying different criteria that can be assessed**, and create a more nuanced view of the food system.

Local is not only food miles

Localness may mean many things, and food miles is a piece of the picture. To reflect this, the researchers relied on multi-criteria evaluation. They tested a new framework of localness as it relates to the food value chain. They applied metrics that can help to quantify this localness, using two case studies from Swiss cheese producers.

These criteria were selected for their recurrence in the literature. But, as the authors note, they can be modified or added to in order to reflect a researcher's needs or questions, or to increase robustness of the model. **What the authors are clear on, however, is the need for models to use multiple dimensions for measurement, as opposed to a single criterion.**

Exploring both physical and social criteria

The authors drew together five criteria (two physical, three social) which they combined to create their assessment scale.

The **physical criteria** they used were:

- **Physical distance** – often cited as a distinct reason for food to be considered local, distance is context-dependant, and means different things to different people. For example, in the US, a state may mean local to residents, but might be as large as some countries (where 'local' might refer only to their county or region). The framework used a logarithmic formula to calculate an average distance weighted by the mass of ingredients.
- **Supply chain size** – the link between size of operations and localness means that small production often equates to more local, whereas larger production often meets demand for more homogenous product through mass production and economies of scale, and engages more broadly with national

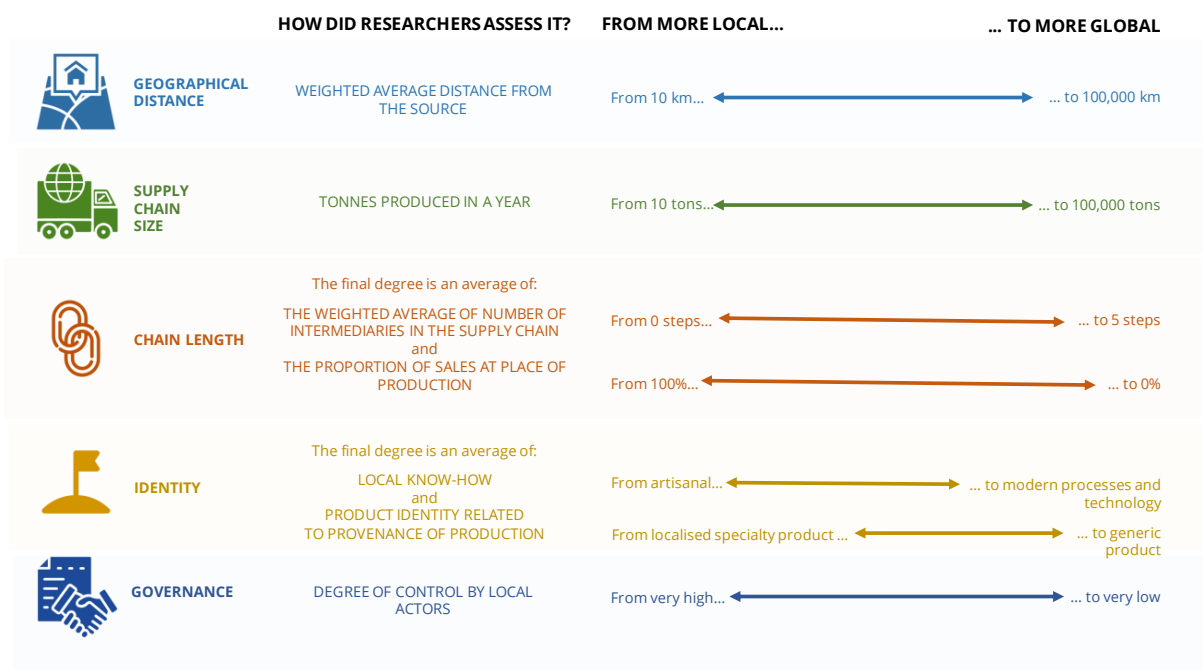


and international markets. The framework used a scale similar to that of distance, which used a logarithmic scale of volume sold, attributing small production to localness.

The **social criteria** were:

- **Chain length** – this calculated the average number of intermediaries between start and finish in the value chain, and formed the chain length. Each step made a product less local.
- **Identity** – possibly the least tangible of the criteria, identity of the food or product was assessed based on its values, heritage, ‘terroir’, sentimental feeling, or cultural value, which legitimises the localness of a product. This was measured by two parameters: process (knowledge and techniques) and traditional identity (how the product relates to its place of production).
- **Governance** – this assessed the degree of participation in decision-making, regarding rules and conditions in organisational activities. The more control held by local actors, rather than representatives or intermediaries, the higher the degree of localness.

All criteria were weighted equally, a decision made by the authors who argued that it was not objectively possible for them to give one criterion more importance than the others (though there may be ways to do this in future studies).



A tale of two cheeses

The researchers used their model to assess two case studies on their scale of localness. One was selected as a more global cheese (Le Gruyère) and one as more local (L’Etivaz). The two chosen cheeses are protected designations of origin (PDO) products, from a similar region, have similar methods of production, and are used for a similar purpose. They differ in scale – Le Gruyère is about 70 times larger in production, and has many more steps in its value chain than L’Etivaz.

They collected data on scale of production; transport of product and inputs for the product (e.g. animal feed, salt, rennet); steps in cheese processing; sales intermediaries; traditional knowledge; technology use and mechanisation; and governance structures.

On a scale of 100% (completely local) to 0% (completely global), **the final degrees of localness were 56% for L’Etivaz and 31% for Le Gruyère**, a less extreme difference than might be expected. The clearest divergence was in identity and governance. There were stricter rules, and more direct engagement, from the L’Etivaz producers than for Le Gruyère. Both volumes produced, and distances shipped, pushed both cheese upwards in the globalness measures.



All that glitters is not local

This study reinforces the need for interdisciplinary evaluations to be integrated when assessing localness. This may be a good exercise for products and organisations claiming localness, helping them to better understand the difference between what the criteria are, as opposed to what they perceive they are (for example, the impact of production input distance).

A major takeaway was that what is perceived as local may not be as local as expected. In this study, the scores that both cheeses received were then discussed with actors involved in the production and trade of the cheeses. Many producers close to the milk and cheese graded the cheeses as more local than the end result showed; those more involved in the value chains were less defensive. Le Gruyère was perceived as less local by these actors than L'Etivaz (59% vs 91% respectively).

It also reminds us of the hybrid nature of food – that even 'local' foods participate in global markets, and that many globally recognised foods retain elements of their origins. It does not penalise foods for engaging in larger markets, but rather acknowledges that those with strong identities (e.g. those with PDO certification) remain locally embedded whilst engaging in international trade. This work reminds us that 'local' can be quite biased, and that sustainability or localness needs to be proven case-by-case.

Emma Burnett - September 2018

Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Emilia Schmitt](#) for her inputs and comments.

Source

[Dr Emilia Schmitt, Barjolle Dominique & Johan Six. \(2017\). "Assessing the degree of localness of food value chains", *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*](#)

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