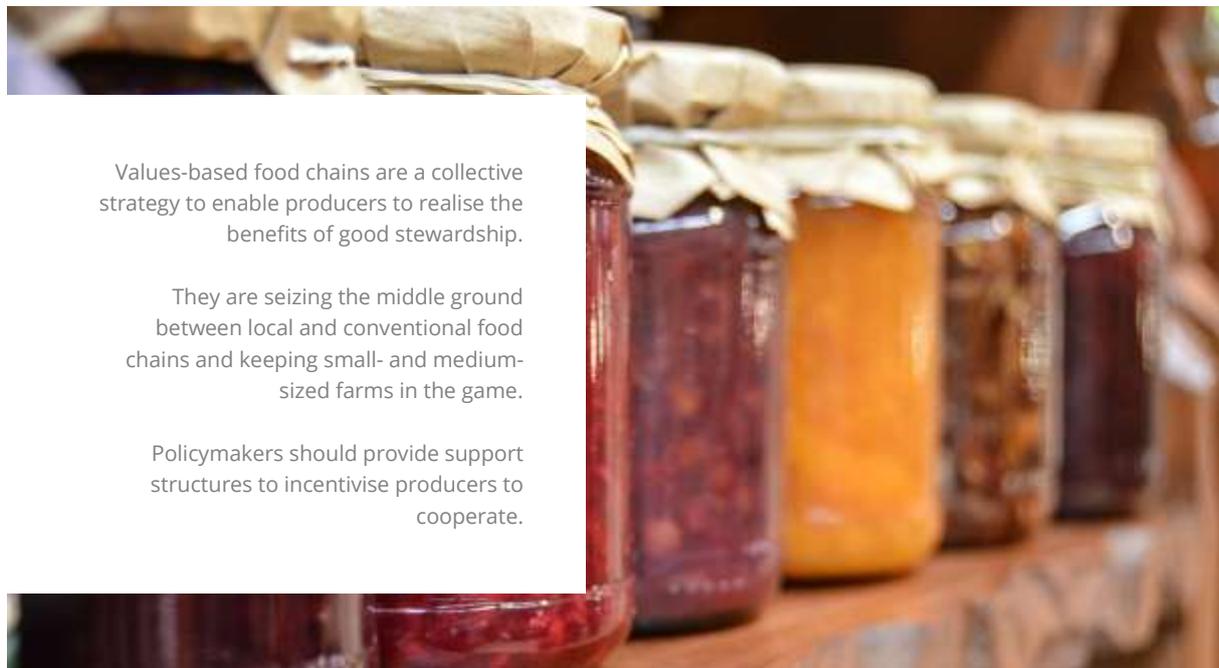


The emergence of values-based food chains



Values-based food chains are a collective strategy to enable producers to realise the benefits of good stewardship.

They are seizing the middle ground between local and conventional food chains and keeping small- and medium-sized farms in the game.

Policymakers should provide support structures to incentivise producers to cooperate.

Marcia Ostrom, Kathryn De Master, Egon Noe, and Markus Schermer recently compiled a special issue in [The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food](#) exploring values-based food chains in Europe and North America. This Special Issue shows that there is continued need to expand and celebrate values beyond monetary and business-related attitudes, including health, quality of life, and social relationships.

Fed by locals

There is growing demand for locally produced, small-scale organic food across Europe and North America.

However, **not everyone is in a position to benefit from the sorts of direct markets that are the main delivery systems of locally produced food to consumers.** Many producers find it difficult to run market stalls or box schemes, or to integrate into restaurant or supermarket ordering systems. Many consumers cannot access markets or afford higher prices of food, or find markets socially or culturally exclusionary.

While the concept of 'local food' has been particularly salient, attracting media, public, and academic attention, [the ideas around localness are hotly contested](#). To move away from this, **some academics and practitioners are choosing instead to focus on other aspects of food chains than can make a difference: practices, institutions (including producers, partner organisations, local governments, economic practices), and marketing tools.**

Emma BURNETT - May 2019

Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Kathryn De Master](#) for her inputs and comments.

Source:

[Ostrom, M., Master, K. D., Noe, E. B., & Schermer, M. \(2017\). Values-based Food Chains from a Transatlantic Perspective: Exploring a Middle Tier of Agri-food System Development. International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food, 24\(1\), 1-14.](#)

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<http://www.urbanfoodfutures.com/values-based-chains>



Led by values

The [introductory paper](#) of the Special Issue explored the core concepts of ‘values’ – social, cultural, economic, environmental, or quality – while cases in the journal analysed challenges and opportunities for small- and medium-sized food producers, and the supply chains they are creating.

Values-based food chains are not synonymous with ‘short food supply chains.’ Short food supply chains facilitate connection between producers and consumers, disrupting opaque and overly complex production and acquisition chains associated with industrial food. Values-based food chains go beyond face-to-face connection and a proximity to the producer by extending to more than location.

Values-based food chains are a collective strategy that enable producers to realise the benefits of good stewardship otherwise not independently possible when competing in industrial food markets.

Their focus has been both on economic and non-economic values: **transparency, long-term shared values, trust, cooperative decision-making, clear lines of communication, and an obligation to equity across the supply chain.** Participants in these food chains differentiate their products from the mainstream by sharing narratives relating to their values, explaining and solidifying their commitments to quality, good production practices, environmental sensitivity, and social relationships. This can be seen in, for example, the [HealthyGrowth case studies](#), which track mid-scale businesses, networks, and initiatives across Europe who are working through values-based food chains.

Values-based food chains can also be piggybacked onto related social and sustainability agendas. [The Michigan Local Food Council Network](#) does this by drawing together practitioners in different fields and working collaboratively towards common goals. By making these connections, they are able to create links that might otherwise be handled separately (or not tackled at all).

Seizing the middle ground between local and conventional food chains

Practitioners and academics have been exploring strategic moves that mid-scale food supply chains could take. These are already set up to distribute food at a regional level, fitting between direct market scale and large, international commodity markets, and can be differentiated from the latter by their economic, social, and environmental values.

These values-based food chains are working within the current market logic. Arguably, however, they are helping to build a more resilient system. Rather than being restricted to the binary choice of engage in the industrial system or to go out of business, medium-scale farmers who produce staple goods remain active, have an income, and potentially have enough aggregate power to compete. In other words, **they are keeping small- and medium-sized farms in the game.**

In the special issue, researchers illustrate how much the values-based messages are retained or lost in the chain. They show that growth can potentially be nurtured to create and capture value, and **the**

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'agriculture in the middle' sector can scale up to address volume demands while retaining embedded values.

Incentivise producers to cooperate

There are limits to values-based food chains, including a need for better infrastructure and engagement from public institutions. Where there is limited support, especially from government and policy, values-based food chains will be [susceptible to attack](#) from large-scale, commodities-driven market forces.

It is particularly important, therefore, to work with policymakers to encourage and protect values-based food chains through mechanisms that are directly relevant to the location of the chain, and ideally through initiatives that aim to tackle multiple issues through [streamlined solutions](#). This can be seen in work done by [Tamar Grow Local](#), who work with local councils and local growers to deliver food to low-income families, providing healthy food to those in need and a stable income to producers.

Policymakers should keep in mind that values-based food chains are as diverse as the places they originate from. This should guide how they are developed from location to location.

Where possible, **policymakers should provide support structures** (financial, technical, marketing, expert knowledge) **to incentivise producers to cooperate**. A key dimension in keeping these value chains up and running is that strategies need to align. Business aims, policies, management, and adaptation during upheaval need a coherent narrative.

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