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Comparing organic urban consumers in developing and developed countries : First results in Brazil and France[1]

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Abstract
Despite numerous studies reporting on sustainable consumption or organic consumer profiles, there is a gap in thorough understanding of organic consumers in different places, since most of studies only investigate organic consumption in most developed countries. The goal of this paper is thus to compare French and Brazilian organic consumers, so as to know if people think and behave differently or similarly in different places. Individual interviews were conducted in each country, with consumers in organic producers market in Brazil, and consumers who buy organic products from farmers markets or local organic food network in France. Products were selected to cover examples of different choice situations such as imported organic products that compete with comparable products of local origin, or organic local products in supermarkets that compete with similar products from other distribution outlets. Results show common consumer concerns such as quality or personal and family health, and common preference for local and organic products but for different reasons. However, results also shed light on different patterns related to environmental concerns or commitment to supporting small or local farmers. The impacts of the findings of this study relate to a diversity of topics such as social mobilization for sustainable agriculture, local organic food networks and environmental concerns.

Keywords : organic food, local food, sustainable consumption, qualitative study

Résumé
De nombreuses recherches portent sur la consommation durable et le profil des consommateurs de produits biologiques, mais ces recherches portent sur la consommation dans les pays développés, et ne permettent pas de savoir s'il existe des différences de consommation entre pays développés et pays en développement. Le but de cet article est de comparer le comportement de consommateurs de produits biologiques en France et au Brésil, sur la base d'entretiens individuels permettant de comparer plusieurs situations de choix : produits biologiques importés en concurrence avec des produits locaux comparables, produits biologiques locaux disponibles en supermarché ou d'en d'autres circuits de distribution,... Les résultats mettent en évidence des attentes communes, comme la qualité ou la santé, et des préférences partagées pour les produits biologiques et locaux, mais pour des raisons différentes dans les deux échantillons. Les résultats montrent également que l'importance accordée aux préoccupations environnementales et au soutien aux petits producteurs locaux n'est pas la même dans les deux échantillons. Cette recherche conduit à des pistes de réflexion portant sur la mobilisation des consommateurs pour la consommation durable, les réseaux de production et consommation de produits biologiques et les préoccupations environnementales des consommateurs.

Mots-clés : produits biologiques, comportement du consommateur, comparaisons inter-culturelles, consommation alimentaire durable

JEL : D1, D8, M31, Q01

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JEL subject descriptors :
D1 Household behaviour.
D8. Information and uncertainty.
M31. Marketing.
Q01 Sustainable Development

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1 Introduction

Half the world's population is now projected to be urban reaching 3.2 billion. Urban areas are gaining an estimated 1.3 million every week. Rural migration and poverty will play a significant role behind this urban growth, and major rural changes – in the South as well as the North – have to be seen and understood in the global context of urban economic development, population growth and uneven resource distribution (UN-HABITAT Debate 2004 & UN-HABITAT 2004/2005).

The diversity and concentration of economic activity in cities are also a major drive behind urban growth, which ensures that metropolises in many places of the world are the leading sector of macro-economic development (Zetter & Hamza eds, 2004). Therefore the processes of urbanization and economic progress are empirically mutually reinforcing (Black & Henderson, 1999). On a global scale, changes in information, production and transportation technologies have had profound effects on urbanization (Irwin & Bockstael, 2004).

These economic impacts of globalization and urbanization have also accelerated the changes on how the modern food chain is organized. From previously being a supply driven chain with the market power placed in food manufacturing, the food chain has now become a demand driven chain where the market power has moved to the retail and supermarket sector (Kledal, 2003 & 2005) (Schröder & Lee,).

The organic food and farm system itself has over the past two decades been transformed from a loosely coordinated local network of producers and consumers to a globalised system of formally regulated trade which links socially and spatially distant sites of production and consumption (Raynolds, 2004). Though preferences for local organic food persist, Northern countries are increasing their reliance on organic imports, particularly from the global South moving beyond local seasonal products and bulk grains, to include a wide array of tropical products, counter-seasonal produce, processed foods etc. (Raynolds, 2004).

Organic food and farming is now found in more than 100 countries including developing and middle-income countries (Willer & Yussefi, 2004). The major markets for organic food and drink are Europe and North America, which account for roughly 97 percent of global revenues and the markets are growing (Raynolds, 2004). Trade in organic food across continents is increasing and organic products from developing countries like Brazil, Egypt and Uganda are being exported to e.g. Europe. Major northern markets offer good prospects for suppliers of organic products not domestically produced. These include coffee, tea, cocoa, spices, sugar cane, tropical fruits and beverages, as well as fresh produce in the off-season.

Increasingly, governments in developing countries are creating conditions in support of organic export (Scialabba & Hattam, 2002). Regional markets of organic products are also expected to increase in developing countries like Brazil, China, India, Egypt and South Africa along with increasing economic development and a more educated and affluent middle-class of consumers (Willer & Yussefi, 2004). Although certified organic products make up a minor share of the world food market (1-2%) it is the fastest growing segment of the food industry (Raynolds, 2004).

Supermarkets in developing countries, as the supplier and marketplace for food, are traditionally viewed by development economists, policymakers and practitioners as the rich world's place to shop. But supermarkets are no longer just niche players for rich consumers in the capital cities of the countries in respectively Latin America, Africa and Asia. The rapid rise of supermarkets in these regions in the past five to ten years has transformed agri-food markets at different rates and depths across regions and countries. Many of those transformations present great challenges –

even exclusion – for small farms, and small processing and distribution firms, but also potentially great opportunities (Reardon et al, 2003).
Global supermarket expansion is therefore closely related to the rapid urban development worldwide.

At the same time supermarket sales of organic products have been increasing, dominating sales in the UK and Switzerland and controlling 80% of sales in Denmark (Kledal, 2006). This development may spread also to the home markets in developing countries. Higher incomes and lower food prices have increased consumer preferences for greater variety far wider than specialized food producers or manufacturers can provide, and hence pushed the market power at the end of the food chain with a growing concentration among international supermarket chains.

Organic farming might be pushed towards the conventional farming model as multinational agribusinesses and global supply chains penetrate the organic community and its markets (Buck et al., 1997; Guthman, 2004; Tovey, 1997). This could result in the same basic social, technical and economic characteristics - specialization and enlargement of farms (Milestad & Darnhofer, 2003), decreasing prices, increasing debt loads with increasing capital intensification, increased use of external inputs and marketing becoming export-oriented rather than local (Hall & Mogyorody, 2001; Milestad & Hadatsch, 2003).

In relation to economic growth and various urban changes, there has also been an increased consumer awareness as well as environmental concern in regards to food (Thøgersen and Ölander, 2002). This awareness has lead to a growing interest in health-related or organic products, as well as an increasing consumer interest in having a closer relationship with the food producer, but the gap between these types of concerns and actual consumer behaviour still has to be understood (Sirieix and Codron, 2004). Very few studies have been conducted on consumer attitudes towards organic products in developing countries, as well as on the link between consumers' attitudes and the connection to more fundamental urban economic changes.

This double situation of increased demand for organic food and belief in Organic Food and Farming as a development pathway on the one hand and the increased conventionalisation and globalisation of Organic Food and Farming on the other hand is the starting point for the Global Organic research project GLOBALORG (www.globalorg.dk). Four case studies in developing countries (Brazil, China, Uganda, Egypt) will be compared to two case studies in Europe: France and Denmark.
The objective of GlobalOrg project is to study the urban economic factors influencing consumer preferences respectively for short versus long procurement systems supplying organic food in developed and developing countries.
The project consists of three tasks:

(1) To document the urban socio-economic development of the chosen areas
(2) to document the various organic food procurement networks and
(3) to study consumers motivations and barriers to buy, and meaning of, organic food.

This article presents first results from the third task.

2 Study area and research methods

Despite numerous studies reporting on sustainable consumption or organic consumer profiles (e. g. Torjusen et al., 2001; Sirieix et al. 2006, Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006), there is a gap in thorough understanding of organic consumers in different places, since most of studies only investigate organic consumption in developed countries, and little is known about organic consumers in developing countries (Soares et al. 2006). For example, is today's growth in consumption of organic food in some developing countries due to individual attributes such as taste and health or is it related to social embeddedness and alternative food networks for some consumers as it is in Europe (Sage, 2003) ?

The goal of this research is to provide first answers to this question by comparing French and Brazilian organic consumers, so as to know if people think and behave differently or similarly in different places.

A qualitative study has been conducted to:

- Study consumer trade-off and related internal conflicts: organic vs. conventionally-produced food, imported vs. local food, …
- Assess under which conditions consumers are ready to buy organic products: grown / produced locally, specific mode of distribution or length of the distribution chain
- Relate consumers' concern and internal conflicts with (1) their individual vs. altruistic values (Schwartz, 1994, Thogersen and Olander, 2002), (2) their knowledge and attitudes about organic products, health, risk (Thogersen, 2006), (3) the distribution chains they use (long versus short commodity chains)
- Assess within developed and developing countries common and specific consumers concerns, attitudes and behaviours related to organic food and its distribution.

Individual interviews were conducted in each country, with 8 consumers in organic producers market in Campinas, SP, Brazil, and 12 consumers who buy organic products from farmers markets or local organic food network in Montpellier, France. Products were selected to cover examples of different choice situations such as imported organic products that compete with comparable products of local origin, or organic local products in supermarkets that compete with similar products from other distribution outlets.

More precisely, interviewees had to compare a local and organic food product, a local and conventionally produced food product, and an imported organic food product. They had to

- (1) answer questions related to their attitudes and consumption intention (related to environment, health, price,..),
- (2) describe the person who typically buys and consumes each type of product
- (3) describe the person who never buys or consumes each type of product,
- (4) react after reading a discussion between three invented consumers (one who buys local or imported organic food, regardless of the mode of distribution or length of the distribution chain, the second one who only buys local and organic products and prefers not to buy them in supermarkets and, the third one who buys conventionnally produced local products),
- (5) discuss on the basis of open questions about food miles, mode of distribution, and producers.

3 First results

In spite of different contexts and samples, results show common consumer concerns and preferences, but they also shed light on different concerns and trade-offs.

Different contexts and samples

The consumption of organic food has increased in France for the last ten years, even if the French market for organic food is not as mature as other European organic markets such as Denmark or Germany. On the contrary, most of the Brazilian organic production is exported, mainly to Europe, the United States and Japan. The domestic market for organic food is thus a "niche" market.

As regard to certification, the situations are contrasted too : while in France there is one well known and trusted label "AB", there are in Brazil more than 20.

Brazilian and French retail structures are not really different. In France, the main supermarket chains are responsible for 80% of the food sales, and in Brazil in 2002, traditional retail is responsible for 20.4% of food sales, supermarket chains for 43.9% and independent supermarkets for 35.7% (Farina et al., 2004).

Our samples in Brazil and France do not have the same socio-demographic structure. In Brazil, the interviews were conducted with consumers from "Parque ecologico de Campinas" and "feira dos produtores organicos". Most are middle or high middle social classes consumers (liberal professionals, professors, doctors, dentists, insurance agents,…). In France, all the social classes are represented in the sample. These differences are due to the differences previously noticed in the life cycle of the organic market in France and Brazil. However, Brazilian and French interviewed consumers both have high education degree and a high health and risk consciousness.

Attitudes towards local and / or organic food

We have first studied attitudes towards three types of products : local and organic, local and imported, and local and conventional products.

Local and organic food

Even if the price is perceived as high, above all by brazilian consumers, local organic food is associated with quality, health, environmental friendliness and link with the producers. In the brazilian interviews, "trust" is a word that is always present.

Consumers who buy local organic food are described in both samples as well off people, health-conscious and concerned by environmental issues.

This kind of food is thus highly appreciated in both samples. However, the invented consumer who only buys local and organic products and prefers not to buy them in supermarkets is the least appreciated profile by 7 french respondents, and no French chose him as the most appreciated. On the contrary, he is the most appreciated consumer for 4 brazilian respondents and is the least appreciated profile by only one Brazilian. This difference is mainly due to the attitude towards imported organic food, which is largely accepted in the French sample, and rejected in the brazilian sample.

Imported organic food

The invented consumer who prefers organic food, and does not pay attention to the fact that it is local or imported is the most appreciated profile by 9 french and 4 brazilian respondents, and no respondent chose him as the least appreciated. However, important differences between the two samples do appear:

French interviewees do not see major differences between local and imported organic food as regard to health, quality or environment. They do not take into account food miles.

However, two kinds of attitudes are to be noticed within the French sample.

- According to some consumers, buying imported organic food is necessary since tropical products such as quinoa, bananas, ...cannot be found in France. Another motive for buying imported organic food is the fact that the products these consumers buy are organic and fair trade products. So they describe consumers who buy imported organic food as well off people, health-conscious, environmental-conscious but also concerned by mobilization for development of

small producers from poor countries. (“I think of chocolate, I mean cocoa. I buy organic and fair trade because I cannot imagine not to respect people (for example by buying at a very low price). Here people have fair working conditions, but not in the developing countries”).

- On the contrary, others are reluctant. Some do not trust imported organic food since they do not know how organic production is controlled out of France, others think only snobbish persons buy imported organic products.

In Brazil, the image of local product is really strong : Brazilians are very proud of their local tropical products and do not see the use of imported products, apart from some processed food. They think foreign products are too expensive, they do not like them because they think that transportation can lead to a loss of product quality, and because they do not trust foreign products. (“I have doubts about imported product quality, and I am not sure that it is really an organic product”). One respondent added that it seems snobbish to buy unnecessary imported products.

Besides, one respondent mentioned food miles and the consequences of transportation on environment.

Local and conventional food

Local food is associated with freshness and good quality in the French sample. French interviewees also lay particular emphasis on the relationship with the producers, and the fact that they know and trust them.

Consumers who buy local products are described in France as people who like good food, are attached to their region and to tradition. (“He buy goat cheese from a small local producer. I think “even if it is not organic, it cannot be bad”. I trust organic products completely, and I partially trust him”). However, some interviewees stress the fact that sometimes buying local products is a snobbish behaviour, and that buying only local or french products prevents poor countries development.

The invented consumer who buys local products is the least appreciated profile by 5 french respondents, whereas 3 French respondents chose him as the most appreciated.

In Brazil, respondents attitude towards local and conventional food is mainly negative. Some respondents sometimes buy conventional products only because of low prices, and availability, but local products are described as “full of pesticides”, and even “poisoned” and “very dangerous for health”). The invented consumer who buys local products is the least appreciated profile by 5 brazilian respondents, whereas just one of them chose him as the most appreciated.

4 Discussion

Results show common consumer concerns such as quality or personal and family health, and common preference for local products but for different reasons.

Common motives and barriers as regard to organic food

Results first confirm previous studies on organic food in developed countries (Wier et al., 2006; Sirieix et al. 2006): Health (personal or family health) remains the main motivational drive for organic products, and food scandals appear as further motivational factors. Hedonistic values are important too, above all in France where consumers associate organic food with good and natural taste.

Environmental concerns are more important in France than in Brazil, but only related to food production. The interviewees do not take into account pollution due to transportation, and only one consumer in each sample spontaneously spoke of food miles.

Organic consumption is also described in both samples by some consumers as a political and ethical act; some brazilian interviewees are part of producers associations and actively support organic producers.

Common barriers were evoked: price, above all in Brazil where the price gap with conventional products is perceived as really high, but consumers think that products in organic markets are less expensive than organic products in supermarkets. Besides, the availability of the products is seen in both countries (above all in Brazil) as insufficient.

Common preferences but different reasons behind preferences

Results show that in both samples consumers declare strong preferences for organic, local food and short chains. But different reasons explain these preferences.

Organic food is not defined on the same basis in France and Brazil: in France, organic food is clearly related to "AB" label, while in Brazil organic food may be with or without label.

Definitions of local products are different too: in France, the scope is narrow, local products are products from the close region. ("The producer is a local producer, he lives close to me. If he were not very close, I would not trust him".). On the contrary, in Brazil "local" means from the State, or from Brazil.

The difference in organic labeling explains that in France trust is mostly linked to the label, whereas in Brazil trust is based on personal relationship with producers.

Local products are preferred in France due to the contacts they suppose with the producer, thus confirming previous results (Sirieix et al., 2006). In Brazil local organic products are preferred because of their high perceived quality, and imported products are perceived as too expensive. But another important motive for the brazilian consumers that we interviewed is the will to support local farmers and local economy. ("I buy local organic food to help my country, my neighbor, and small producers."). One consumer added that buying local organic products at a high price allows to give decent wages for local workers. ("I would buy organic products from another state, but not from another country. My main motive: help people who work in my country. Act locally and think globally").

Last, common preferences for direct or short chains are due to the pleasure of human contact and direct link in France, as already shown by Sirieix et al. (2006). This preference is more due to trust and commitment in Brazil. Brazilian consumers that we interviewed do not trust supermarkets and think that buying local products directly fom the organic farmers is important to support small farmers and local development. ("Supermarkets do everything not to help organic products. They sell them at a very expensive price").

Different concerns and trade-off

Even if results show common consumer concerns and preferences, they also shed light on different patterns related to environmental concerns or commitment to supporting small or local farmers.

Environmental concerns are important in both samples, but seem more important in France, even if food miles are not taken into account. In Brazil, the main motive is more clearly health, and within altruistic values, concerns for small organic farmers are more important than environmental concerns.

Moreover, in Brazil we can notice a stronger preference for local and organic products; Brazilian respondents do not trust local and conventional food but clearly reject imported organic food because of price and need to support local farmers. In France the trade-off between local and conventional products and, imported organic products is not so clear.

Conclusion and further research

This study has shed light on different consumer trade-offs and related internal conflicts due to social and economic factors (trust in labels, prices…) or personal values.

We also noticed different conditions under which consumers are ready to buy organic products: in Brazil, consumers we have interviewed clearly prefer products that were grown or produced locally and specific mode of distribution: they are loyal to organic markets and reject supermarkets. In France, consumers like better producers markets than supermarkets but buy processed and imported organic products at supermarkets.

On a theoretical level, the impacts of the findings of this study relate to a diversity of topics such as

- the links between personal values and behaviour (Wier et al., 2006), individual values, altruistic values (benevolence and universalism) and the related question of consumer reflexivity (Giddens, 1991). For example, in Brazil, imported organic food is more rejected than in France, but in both samples, consumers concern and internal conflicts are linked to both individual and altruistic values: some French consumers are willing to buy organic imported products such as bananas because they like them (individual value of pleasure) and others because they think that buying fair trade organic products allow them to support small producers from developing countries (altruistic value). Some Brazilian consumers reject organic imported food because they think the quality is lower (individual value of pleasure), and others because they want to support Brazilian organic producers (altruistic value).

- the question of the meaning of consumption. Can consumption be a political act ? It is clearly the case for some consumers. One french respondent explained why she buys organic imported bananas " It is a political choice : when you see how conventional bananas are cultivated, with dangerous products, dangerous for the workers, it is a shame to eat them, it is a scandal. It is too easy, we have everything in our plate, we do not ask questions to ourselves. Thus, buying organic imported food is not a preference, we just have no other choice ».

- What are the links between local and/or organic consumption and social embeddedness (Scholten 2005) ? This question is related to social mobilization for sustainable agriculture (Moreno-Penaranda, 2006) and the role of local organic food networks (Seyfang, 2006). Brazilian consumers motives who buy in local organic network to support small farmers and local economy are in line with the analysis of local organic network by Seyfang (2006), which incorporates localisation, community-building, and collective action.

Last, implications for public policy and marketing of local and organic products are important too. Results show the importance of trustworthy labels for the development of organic markets, and the need to support short distribution chains.

To conclude, further qualitative research is needed, but we hope that these first results increase our understanding of the factors influencing organic urban consumers in developed and developing countries.

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