

## **Building sustainable local food networks in unsustainable environment as a lesson from post-transition countries**

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During the last few years there has been a noticeable increase, within the field of sociology of rural areas, in the study of the agriculture's role in the cultural and social landscape of the countryside. The question whether food production systems or, in a wider sense, forms of agriculture are compatible with the concept of sustainable development of rural areas has recently fueled an on-going debate (Rastoin 2009: 12). On the one hand, it is difficult not to observe certain attempts which aim at embedding of non-economic concepts of agricultural development. On the other hand, specification, intensification, spatial homogenization and pressure for modernization all indicate rather a stable character of agricultural production in a global scale (Buttel 2006: 217).

Social sciences and the geographical concepts of the qualitative departure as well as Alternative Agro-Food Networks proposed by David Goodman can serve as an attempt to answer the above-posed question about the problem concerning the interdependence of the ideas on the rural areas development (Goodman 2004).

To put it simply, all of them raise a question about the place of alternative forms of production and food consumption in the policy of development as well as improving the chances of rural areas. Moreover, they try to unite and grasp the change of stress transferred, to a certain degree, to the analysis of such phenomena as ecological and traditional agriculture, short food chains, alternations of methods of consumption, local food processing, non-economic functions of agricultural production (Higgins, Dibden, Cocklin 2008: 15).

In this article, I will attempt to transfer the idea of Alternative Agro-Food Networks onto the realities of Eastern Europe, putting the emphasis on how socio-cultural uniqueness of the region determines the chances and directions of alternative Agro-Food Networks. This article presents the results of research conducted within the *Facilitating Alternative Agro-Food Networks: Stakeholder Perspective* project that was carried out as part of the *Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community*. Unfortunately, territorial limitations, as well as the preliminary and exploratory character of the research cause that the conclusions

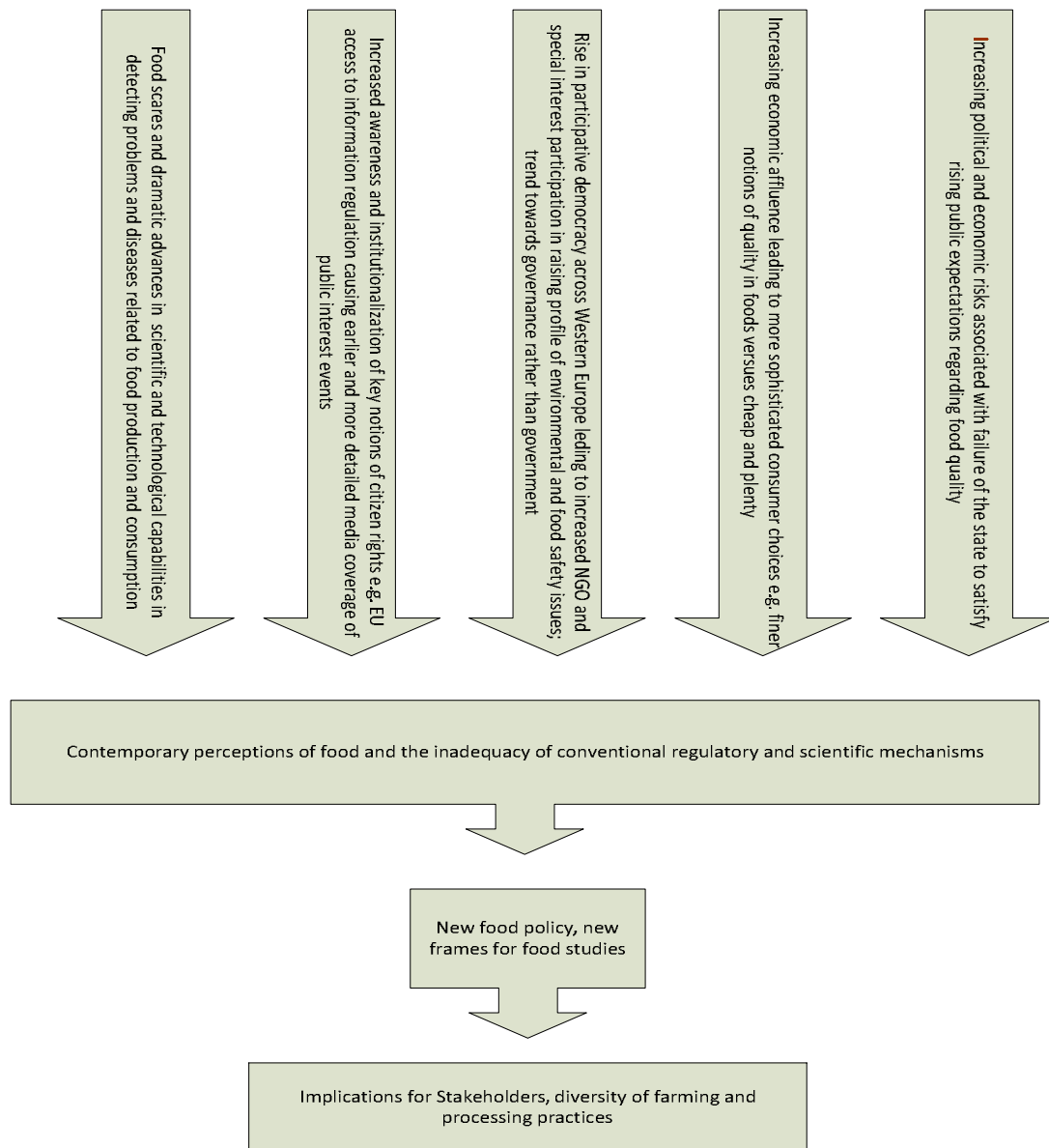
presented in this article can be treated only as a contribution to the discussion. Therefore, the outcomes fail to answer exhaustively all the questions concerning AAFN in the described region.

Before I start to elaborate on the results of the research, I will try to outline briefly the reasons why social sciences show interest in AAFN. Furthermore, I will make an attempt to evaluate the usefulness of the term in the context of the development relating to the countries' rural areas which have undergone structural transformation.

Certainly, any attempt at defining both the place and role of agriculture is strongly connected with the departure from its industrial vision, as well as emphasizing the growing or recurrent trends in Europe that aim at relocalising the production and food processing (Sonnino, Marsden 2006: 181).

One of the most significant reasons for the occurrence of such a change are *food scares*, constant reports on food problems, dioxin scandals or BSE. All those factors increase the consumer pressure on improving the quality and safety of agricultural production (Goodman 2004: 5).

Fig. 1 Factors contributing to perceptions of food, new regulatory and scientific approaches (Marsden 2006: 7, modified)

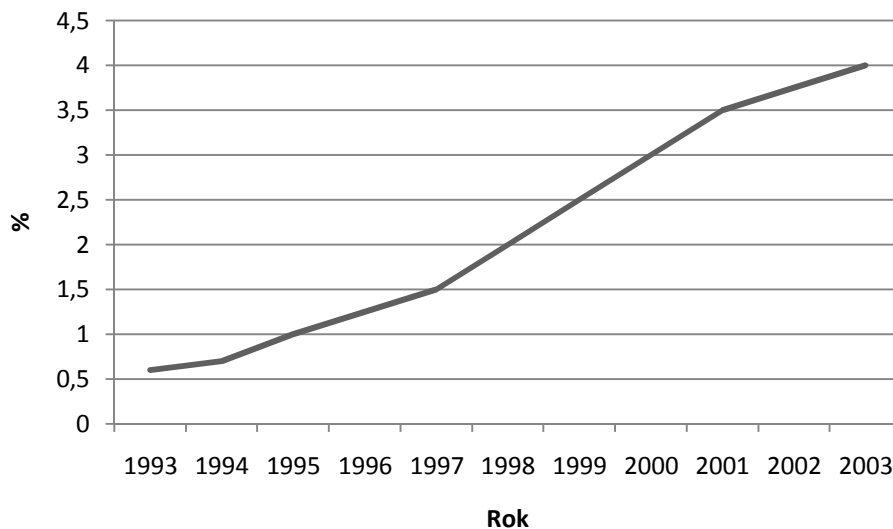


That phenomenon has overlapped with a range of other processes, such as the change in priorities within the Common Agricultural Policy, the increase in the interest of non-profit organizations connected with agriculture, and finally, the growing democratization of local communities.

All these elements contribute to the fact that the European agriculture started insisting on the improvement of both the quality and the safety of food. Among the initiators are the following institutions: consumer groups, educational institution responsible for the diagnosis

of hazards, as well as political institutions that implement new quality control mechanisms (Marsden 2006: 7).

Fig.2 Growth in area of organic farming in EU (*Organic 2005: 10*)



It seems that the issues regarding the connection between the environmental protection and the rise in the quality and safety become more and more important elements in the process of shaping the future agricultural production in the European Union. Suffice it to say, the two elements are to play the crucial role and become the reference points for the development mechanisms in the Common Agricultural Policy reform, the implementation of which is bound to take place after the year 2013.

Meanwhile, the question still remains whether the change of production priorities corresponds with the change of the paradigm concerning the rural areas development; and to what extent will agriculture become an inherent part of concepts referring to rural areas development?

There are two major approaches that dominate in this field. The first one implies that the change will result in relocalization of agriculture and restoring the socio-cultural space of countryside (van Der Ploeg, Renting 2004). The representatives of the latter assume that the change will be comparatively irrelevant and that it will finally come down to a creation of an exclusive niche (Goodman 2004).

Without going into details of this contrary arguments, it should be taken into account that there exists a real risk of limiting the reform of agriculture to its technical aspects. The methods of ecological production serve as the best examples. One of the processes that seems

most interesting and worth analyzing is the ongoing industrialization of this sector. On the one hand, we arrive with the idea of biodynamic agriculture which stemmed from non-economic needs for a diversification of agriculture. On the other hand, the processes of institutionalization, as well as industrialization of agriculture become particularly visible (Guthman 2004: 301). Therefore, this type of activity meets the safety requirement and that of the product quality. However, it does not bring anything supremely new to the cultural and social structure of the countryside. In other words, conventionalization of alternative forms of agriculture affects the economic capital, yet it does not influence its socio-cultural forms (Van Der Ploeg, Renting 2004: 238).

The basic question is: how should agriculture be shaped in order to preserve or renew interactions and the positive impact, which farmers had on communities, space and rural nature? Is it possible to reverse the global trends that aim at partial localization of agriculture? The concept of Alternative Agro-Food Networks provides us with an answer this question.

One of the basis assumptions consists of agricultural regionalization, meeting safety and quality requirements which all together ought to proceed with a simultaneous consideration of changes that take place on the level of local communities. The purpose is to integrate the agricultural production issues with rural sustainable development by uniting or rather connecting, such groups as: farmers, local communities, manufacturers, consumers, etc. (Goodman 2002: 271).

The introduction of Alternative Agro-Food Networks reverses the prospect of approaching alternative forms of agriculture by putting the emphasis on their integrated character which also refers to the rural areas development. In other words, the change concerning this particular form of agricultural production is not only connected with the external influence, but also stems from the changes that take part in rural areas. Before trying to define the concept, it is important to focus on the reasons for the growing interest in alternative methods of agriculture. Originally, they were suppose to serve as an alternative to a network of agricultural product sales, and create an opposition to the supremacy of supermarket chains and those located far away from consumers. Another interpretation stresses the willingness of sustaining and popularizing the technique of production that guarantees the quality of products, by identifying the above-mentioned chains with ecological or traditional agriculture. It seems, however, that the above-presented concepts do not answer the question thoroughly.

In the first place, there is an issue concerning the questionable possibility of arriving with an exhaustive definition of AAFN and determining their nature, which is dependent on socio-cultural context. Preliminary studies indicate that in Europe we deal with two basic conceptualizations of the term. The first tradition, which dominates in Great Britain and the Netherlands, places the emphasis on the necessity to improve hygienic standards, as well as a grassroots approach which should be understood as the society's ability to organize themselves around the issues concerning agriculture and food production (Fonte 2008: 201).

Clear signs of an alternative and local production, which should be approached in the above-mentioned way, are informal groups that have been growing in number and whose aim is to reconstruct the ties with agriculture and rural areas, as well as an access to healthy food.

Green markets serve as a perfect example of community supported agriculture, box schemes. It must be added that these are typical examples of those countries in which the tradition of local agriculture has practically vanished and where industrial agriculture prevails. The second model is based on a deeply rooted tradition, attachment to the region and the practices of pre-industrial agriculture. This approach is typical of the countries (the Mediterranean Basin) which have never fully finished the changes connected with the Industrial Revolution. In this perspective, localness refers to the attempts to bring back the meaning and value to the traditional techniques and products (Fonte 2008: 202).

What seems particularly indispensable in determining the role of AAFN is the raised question concerning localization of agriculture. Any reference to an area, its tradition or values becomes a key issue in shaping the framework of the definition. Furthermore, a considerable potential of AAFN is hidden in this postulate. This fact allows to enroll agriculture on rural development programmes. Moreover, AAFN distinguishes alternative agricultural networks from ecological agriculture and excessive industrialisation of the initiative. Any reference to an area, irrespective of the adopted model, becomes a crucial element that facilitates the identification of AAFN and reinforces cohesion of the network itself through locating it in geographical or cultural region. Localizations of agricultural production can be treated as oppositions.

The above illustration, no matter how one-sided and clear the judgement is, shows, however, the existence of the basic differences between the conventional and located approach to agriculture in rural areas. The latter model seems to match the idea of an anti-modernizing

and anti-global movement and, therefore, tries to construct and express the local identity as well as the culture of rural areas (Gorlach 2004: 235).

As Krzysztof Gorlach states: *Localisation consists in the protection of the uniqueness of the local environment, both natural and cultural; the support of this local uniqueness and the protection of its place in the global village (Gorlach 2004: 235).*

Another problem that should be considered is the meaning of the term 'alternative'. It is important to determine whether this notion stands for production methods, consumer attitudes, or the system of distribution. It seems to be vital because of the analysis of the phenomenon itself, as well as when designing the political mechanisms of development. It must be noticed that while realizing the project, agreeing on one European definition concerning alternative forms of development turned out to be futile. It seems that the definition depends on the context, economic situation, cultural tradition and the social cohesion of a given state. To give examples, Austria places a great emphasis on the ecological regime of production, France stresses the importance of direct distribution, whereas British researchers analyzed the community supported agriculture.

Naturally, such situations cannot be considered satisfactory. A considerable increase in the interest in AAFN cause that there is a need for a common framework which would help to understand and describe the phenomenon. Certainly, AAFN can be described through their oppositional attitude towards the global agro-industrial complex (Buttel 2006: 218).

This oppositional quality does not only refer to the economic and production dimension. The quality is based on a reconstruction of the network of social connections with agriculture, cultural reinterpretation of agricultural production, as well as production methods. Nevertheless, the elements themselves are not sufficient in order to talk about a new creation that would join agricultural development and rural areas. What proves that, is the previously argued example concerning the conventionalization of organic agriculture. This phenomenon matches the industrial logic of development as a result of meeting the requirements concerning alternativity (Guthnam 2002).

Meanwhile, AAFN emerge somewhere at the junction of alternativity and localness. In theory, they possess a potential for changing the customers' attitudes towards food as well as the countryside. Moreover, AAFN influence both social and cultural capital of the inhabitants who live in rural areas. These correlations are shown on the graph below:

Fig. 3 Correlations between form of agricultural production and notion of alternativeness and locality

		Locality	
		Low	High
Alternativeness	High	Organic agriculture	Alternative Agro-Food Networks
	Low	Industrial agriculture	Regional agriculture (small scale but industrial)

Therefore, a New place for a new creation emerges in agriculture and rural areas. The networks, which on the one hand sustain the social, cultural and economic functions of agriculture and connect them with society, find their place within those movements that aim at emphasizing the role of localness in development.

The time has come for defining AAFN, and stressing at the same time that it is only the first attempt and, therefore, it is far from being perfect.

For the sake of the research, which is the basis for this article, AAFN are defined as networks connecting farmers, manufacturers, non-profit organizations, sellers and consumers, etc. í joined through the process of production, food processing, distribution and consumption of food. The networks must have the following characteristics:

- **Regional embeddedness:** production connected with a geographically coherent area.
- **Cultural embeddedness:** production connected with tradition, culture or region uniqueness.
- **Social embeddedness:** a network clearly connects all stakeholders; producers, manufacturers and consumers. Products are no longer perceived as food only, but as tools for identity construction and improving the social coherence of the stakeholders.

- **High quality:** Production is focused on the process of increasing the value through improving product quality, not quantity.
- **Distribution through short food chains:** direct sales, specialist shops or chains of shops, green markets, contracting, regional baskets, etc. Sales should not go beyond the region.
- **Non-economic motivations:** a network is not for profit only. Part of work consists in promoting values of non-economic character, such as a healthy lifestyle, protecting agricultural tradition and integrating local communities.

To sum up, AAFN do not only come down to networks of distribution or high quality. Such networks must connect both rural residents and consumers. Moreover, such a network should reinforce, or at least, make use of the region's culture, as well as be based on a geographically coherent area. It seems though, that despite the changes, it is possible to establish the general frameworks that limit the definitions of alternative networks. We are convinced that the most important element responsible for the shaping of AAFN is the involvement of social, cultural and natural capital in the process of agricultural production (van der Ploeg 2006: 268).

### **The characteristic of rural areas after the transformation from the perspective of constructing AAFN**

One of the most important aspects that are characteristic of rural areas in the countries that have undergone structural transformation is a low level of social capital, particularly in its bridging and linking forms.

International comparative research, such as *World Values Survey*, provides us with very general data regarding social capital. This quantitative research conducted on two representative samples was done twice: in 1990 and in 1995. The advantage of such a procedure consists in the possibility of tracing the dynamics of changes (Reiser, Heapfer, Nowotny, Wallace 2001: 7). The first clue concerning the level of the social capital gives us the measurement of generalized trust. The object of the analysis is, in that case, an index which consist of variables that regard norms of trust and reciprocity that come from the state, community members, as well as the attitude towards altruism, volunteering, faith in the effectiveness of one's actions and institutions

*Fig. 4 Index of social trust (Reiser, Heapfer, Nowotny, Wallace 2001: 6)*

<b>Country</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>
Belarus	25,5	24,1
Bulgaria	30,4	28,6
Czech Republic	30,2	28,5
Hungary	24,6	22,7
Lithuania	30,8	21,9
Poland	<b>34,5</b>	<b>17,9</b>
Romania	16,1	18,7
average in OECD	44,5	43

It is clear that post-communist countries show less generalized trust. Also a visible limitation concerning social circles in comparison with the developed countries is another unfavourable aspect.

*Fig. 5 Relationship inside social circles, in % (Reiser, Heapfer, Nowotny, Wallace 2001: 10)*

<b>% of declared strong relationship with:</b>				
	<b>family</b>		<b>friends</b>	
	<b>high</b>	<b>low</b>	<b>high</b>	<b>low</b>
Belarus	80,48	13,3	31,73	56,5
Bulgaria	88,53	10,24	31,73	50,75
Czech Republic	91,08	7,26	38,65	50,83
Hungary	89,52	8,17	38,33	37,87
Lithuania	73,97	23,22	21,89	56,02
Poland	90,16	9,5	26,11	58,49
Romania	88,83	8,9	20,76	47,45
average for post-transition countries	<i>86,04</i>	<i>11,91</i>	<i>35,35</i>	<i>50,17</i>
average for OECD	<i>85,99</i>	<i>12,12</i>	<i>56,79</i>	<i>38,69</i>

In these circumstances the situation of Poland becomes particularly specific. The following factors: history, social stratification and socialist modernization led to the emergence of the "social void" – a specific phenomenon which consists in diminishing of citizens' identification and identity to the level of family and state institutions. To put it simply, the situation comes down to a general inability to co-operation on the level of informal associations or organizations. This results in setting limits for control with the use of civil society.

From the perspective of AAFN this fact implies the limitation of the social support, precisely, the base which enables to perform innovative and risky activities in rural areas.

Stakeholders who act within those networks are forced to function, to a great extent, on their own.

It seems that this is not the quality or safety of the production that are the key elements of AAFN. These aspects are also typical of industrialized forms of organic agriculture. However, the crucial thing is to construct or rather increase the number of social networks which embrace different stakeholders that are connected with the rural areas through food production or consumption.

At this point, it is time to pose a question, what are the effects of the embedded inability to co-operation of stakeholders on a network of agricultural production?

The research results conducted within the FAAN project indicate that in the case of the countries which have undergone the process of structural and social transformation, the effectiveness of grassroots activities, which aim at creating a support network of alternative products, is relatively limited.

The initiation of networking activities is impeded. What is more, the social base that could support AAFN also leaves a lot to be desired. The character of both social history and the state's structures (the example of Poland) leads to the decrease in the effectiveness of activities based on communitarian vision of the civil society. Therefore, while constructing or supporting AAFN in countries of an unconsolidated tradition of co-operation, an additional emphasis should be put on shaping skills concerning co-operation among stakeholders. It is social capital in its synergic and filled with a network of institutional connections that seems to be the key to the skillful management of AAFN.

Another aspect that affects the shape of AAFN and that is directly connected with the level and assessment of social capital is the role of the public sector. The research, the outcomes of which constitute the basis for this article, indicates supremacy or rather

colonization of the grassroots initiatives in the rural areas performed by stakeholders that are connected with the state institutions. Naturally, this can be due to weakness of society which is not able to control the processes of change. In such a situation, activities or initiatives that are based on the assumption about multigovernance become vulnerable to an acquisition by a stakeholder, especially when he/she has the greatest potential of goods or power.

In the case of post-communist countries, this function is performed by the public sector institutions, beginning from local governments and ending with the bodies that are responsible for hygienic regulations. The institutions have the potential to initiate and control the process of social and economic changes, as they have the right to act, possess financial and human reserves, as well as to the law mechanisms. The role of public institutions should not be perceived according to the binary opposition principle. Undoubtedly, however, it plays a crucial role. It is difficult to imagine how the Polish farmers function without taking into consideration the influence of such bodies, as regional government or Agricultural Advisory Centre. On the one hand, these are the only institutions which support farmers and manufactures, on the other, the bureaucratic logic of such institutions leaves its mark. It is important not to omit the role of organizations that are responsible for the implementation of the European regulations, particularly hygienic regulations. The situation in which regulations are strictly followed can cause the decrease in effectiveness of AAFN, or can even lead to a typical industrial production. What seems vital in this context, are the differences concerning the degree of obedience and restrictiveness of those rules in different EU countries. It is possible that sociology can come up with a solution to this problem of only seemingly technical nature. In a situation when socially accepted methods of quality control and safety are missing, there is a space filled with law. It happens irrespective of society and thanks to that fact, the society functions even in the circumstances in which social ties hardly exist.

As we can see, it is problematic in the studied case to achieve the postulate of social coherence when one tries to construct alternative networks connecting the residents of the rural areas. It is particularly difficult when considering an unfavourable institutional and legal background. Unfortunately, also a postulate of AAFN regional embeddedness seems to be difficult to realize. Traditionally, local identity of rural communities has been for almost fifty years regarded as unfavorable to the proper development of Eastern Europe. The blind application of the modernization paradigm has led to a considerable unification of rural areas, their communities, culture or environment. The situation has been reinforced by demographic processes, the growing urbanisational pressure and industrialisation, as well as deindividualisation of agriculture. As a result, geographical, social and cultural identity of

regions, which constitutes the base for rural communities, has been disturbed. Owing to that fact, the fulfillment of the regional and cultural imperative has become harder. To conclude, it is more difficult for the inhabitants of the rural areas to identify with their place of residence, environment and tradition. An important aspect that constitutes the AAFN's chances is taking into account tacit and local systems of knowledge (Gorlach 2008). Meanwhile, at least part of results from the FAAN project indicates a disorder of such cognitive structures. Both local and regional identities are of an eclectic and egalitarian character, which consists of different elements. It is difficult for a farmer, producer, manufacturer or consumer to operate according to the normative system and values. The situation gets even more interesting when one realizes that on the declarative level the very aspects constituted the base for our respondents' activities. The in-depth analysis revealed how fragile the base was.

To sum up, by the expression 'unsustainable environment of the development of Alternative Agro-Food Networks' I understand a lack or deficiency in the structures of the civil society; the role of the public sector, a lack of legal regulations, especially *Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point* (HAACP) and the disturbed cultural and geographical continuity of rural communities. It has to be stressed that the last element affects both consumers and other links of the chain. A lack of coherence makes the process of identification with rural areas, cultural and natural environment and with the product itself extremely difficult.

### **Towards the new model of AAFN**

Every attempt to answer the question that was posed at the beginning of this article confirms that the AAFN theory should be equipped with an additional model that takes into account the uniqueness of Eastern Europe. Despite certain similarities, the social, cultural and institutional character of rural areas in this part of Europe is unique to such an extent that it requires different solutions concerning the development of Alternative Agro-Food Networks. The idea of alternative production, which puts the emphasis on the quality and safety of production, as well as fair trade also takes into consideration such factors as social aspects, localization of agriculture, bottom-up management of rural environment. Owing to that fact, it becomes particularly significant to conceptualize the model, which would suit the character of the rural areas after structural transformation. In the described case, it is necessary to emphasize the support of local communities and their abilities to act. It is even more difficult, but equally important, to work out informal and non-institutionalized standards of co-operation in

production, food processing and sales. One should also bear in mind the importance of creating and sustaining the connections between rural communities and consumers. AAFN are one out of few initiatives that allow to join different groups in the process of the sustainable development of rural areas. Making an attempt to work out the model of co-operation within the Alternative Agro-Food Systems of production is the key to success. Doing so, would help to minimize the danger stemming from the unsustainable character of the social background in which AAFN happen to function in Eastern Europe.

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