



Description Workshop 6.1

WS 6.1: Balancing and communicating overall assessments of food systems

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Convenor:

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Submit abstract:

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Abstract:

In order to develop better and more sustainable food systems, we need to make, and use, overall assessments of their effects, based on multiple criteria. This is a complex and very difficult task. Two of the main challenges are 1) how to balance very different types of assessments and avoid bias in favour of accurate knowledge and that which is easy to measure, and 2) how to communicate complex overall assessments in such a way they can be used in practice by different actors and stakeholders with different perspectives and values.

Description:

Alternative, more sustainable food systems are developed in relation to a plurality of societal objectives and ethical guidelines, such as the organic principles. The success of these alternatives depends on whether they can continue to improve in relation to their goals, and thereby maintain credibility and trust; and to do this, there is a need for overall assessments of their effects on society, environment and nature. Developing and using such overall, multicriteria assessments poses significant cross- and transdisciplinary challenges. In this workshop we focus on two main challenges: balancing and communicating.

Some of the effects of food systems can be measured in quantitative terms. For others, qualitative assessments are more suitable. Some are well known, others little known. Some are easy to measure, others difficult and costly to assess. The first challenge in making overall assessments based on multiple criteria is therefore how to establish a balance between the different types of assessments and knowledges. This concerns both foundational, theoretical issues and more practical, methodological issues. Attempting to evaluate all aspects of organic farming in monetary terms, for instance, would be both empirically demanding and theoretically problematic.

Furthermore, such overall assessments will be of little use if they cannot be understood and accepted by the many different actors and stakeholders in food systems. The second challenge is thus how to communicate overall assessments so that they can be used in the development of alternative food systems – something

which requires a mutual learning process between researchers and stakeholders. An important question here is how normative criteria are built into a multicriteria assessment framework, e.g. in the selections and condensations made and in the 'orientors' connected to the chosen indicators; and how these built-in values relate to the ethical principles, the societal objectives, and the values and interests of different stakeholders. There is a need for normative transparency. A second important question is how to communicate very complex assessments in an effective and participatory way. The ability to handle complex information differs, there are multiple expert and stakeholder perspectives involved, and the media play an important role when credibility and trust are constructed and negotiated. Reduction of complexity is necessary, but where and how is decisive.

Workshop method and organisation:

Oral presentation. Participants are expected to have read the papers before the workshop. At the workshop, there will be three minute presentations of the main theses in the paper, followed by round-table discussions, one group for each paper. Summary from each group at the end, beginning with 'lessons learned' from the presenter and supplemented by others.

What can the participant expect?

In depth discussions of the papers presented. Cross- and transdisciplinary perspectives on how to balance and communicate overall assessments of alternative food systems.

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