

THE REASON FOR EXISTENCE OF THE BUYING COMMUNITY TYPE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS IN LIGHT OF CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND PREFERENCES

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ABSTRACT – This study is focused on the necessity of the development and the formation of “net-bag” type local food systems and presents partial results of my surveys analyzing the consumer attitudes to local Hungarian foods, as well as the reputation of consumer communities. The enhancement of the conscious food consumer needs, simultaneously with the dilemmas of the sustainability of the current food supply systems and the fact that retailers are pushed into the background have aroused my research interest. During the survey, I conducted a questionnaire with the consumers in four towns where consumer communities had already existed, namely Kecskemét, Esztergom, Érd, and Csömör by involving 54 students (sophomores of BA in Rural Development and Agribusiness at Szent István University in Gödöllő, Hungary). The aim of the research was to demonstrate how the consumers in the urban and rural places with different territorial and demographic characteristics are related to locally made food products and how important it is for them to consume and to access these goods. In the above-mentioned consumer communities, the high value-added products of local producers (as well as those living around) are available, consequently, regarding the exploitation of spreading/developing possibilities, it is essential to know whether there is a need/demand for these food products among consumers. Two of the above-mentioned sample locations, Érd and Csömör, belong to the agglomeration of Budapest that is a key regarding the examination. The main issue is whether consumer communities in these special places have a reason for existence or not.

Keywords: consumer communities, local food systems, food consumer behaviour and attitude

INTRODUCTION

According to Martinez and his fellow authors (2010), as there is not a universally accepted definition of local foods, the conceptualization/definitions of the types of the local food markets may promote the evaluation of these markets. The local food markets can be divided into categories: the first one means the direct transactions between the producers and consumers (directly to the consumers) and the second one includes the direct selling of producers to restaurants, retailers' shops or to institutions such as government offices, hospitals and schools (directly to the retailers/catering units). The locations of the “directly to the consumers” local food marketing involve the producers' markets, the agricultural units supported by communities, the stall of farms and the “pick-it-yourself” activities. Other informal sources of local foods are very difficult or even impossible to examine: subsistence agriculture, the sharing of products among neighbours, the feeding and hunting as well as further “pick-it-yourself” programs. Local foods may be obtained through an agent by the final consumers of retailer units. Wholesalers, distribution centres of companies and consumer communities may be considered as agents.

According to the EU, the definition of local food may be as follows:

- it is produced locally (in the relevant region);
- it should be regarded as an issue promoting the local/regional rural development strategies;

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- it is transmitted to the consumer sensibly and efficiently: the chain consists of the a) producer or the local producing unit; b) cooperatives responsible for the harmony and balance of demand and supply; and c) the consumer;
- it can be sold in the local shops as well as at open-air markets according to local contracts, but it is not allowed to be sold to a central forestalling department of a retailer chain according to the rules of the label “local food”;
- it guarantees the good taste, quality, cultural motivation, local tradition, local specialties, animal welfare, as well as the environmental values, health issues and sustainable producing conditions;
- it is sold at the nearest place to the consumer sensibly and efficiently: distances may vary depending on the products, regions and conditions. One thing is important: the selling point should be as near to the consumer as possible (it can be one or even fifty kilometres) (The foresight analysis of the Committee of Regions- Local food systems 2011/C 104/01).

According to Gail W. Feenstra (1997), not only the varied and adequate diet can help the maintenance of the health of an individual, but also the method of food production and the distribution of foods, as well as the consumption that have an impact on the environmental, social, mental, and economic well-being of the communities. She is convinced that at several places the development of local food economies will result in the logical and adequate method of the revival of local communities. All around the world sustainable local food systems are planned and created adjusted to the necessities of the relevant communities. These systems are to make the farmers economically effective contributing to the national capital and democracy for all members of the community applying environmentally friendly producing and distributing methods. According to Szeberényi and Gerencsér (2016), it would be important for the settlements to have an awareness and financial support for the introduction of any local regulations that promote and encourage the use of alternative solutions to protect the local environment and resources.

The local food systems reduce the physical distance between the producer and the consumer allowing them to get in touch with each other and to market as well as to sell directly the local food deriving from ecological farming. There are more and more well-known forms of the local food systems based on the level of consumer commitment. Based on the categorization of Vadovics and Hayes (2007), Réthy and Dezsény (2013) divided the local food systems into two big groups. The first one is represented by the so-called “economic systems” based on the cooperation between the farmers and consumers; the second one is represented by the “non-economic systems” in the frame of which the consumers produce at their own homes or in the more and more fashionable “community gardens”. Within the economic systems they distinguish “the agriculture promoted by the communities” and their subtypes (symmetrical farming, the system of regular customers, consumer communities), respectively the “local product trademark systems” and the “producer markets”. The level of consumer commitment is the highest in case of the agricultural systems supported by the communities. In this study, I focus on the economic systems and within that on the consumer communities existing under the auspices of agriculture supported by the communities that can be considered as the relatively new and innovative channels of short food supply systems. Communities buying food are initiatives organized from below promoting the local food production and food selling.

Scientific literature specialized in agro- and food industrial economic issues concentrates on alternative practices such as home food production, consumer communities, agriculture supported by the communities, town food councils, local food systems, school programs of farms, etc. (see e.g.: Cooley–Lass 1998; DeLind, 1999; Lamine, 2005; Mariola, 2008). According to the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) founded in Switzerland in 1895, the co-operatives are based on an autonomous and volunteer co-operation of those who realize their common economic, social and cultural demands through a jointly-owned venture directed in a democratic way.

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Based on the above-mentioned, four main characteristics of the consumer communities can be identified:

- It is a *co-operation of individuals*. It means that the focus is on the individual activity as the structures of these communities are not dependent on the capital and profit placing the people into the centre. It has an impact on the rules of the relevant communities: voting rights are related to the slogan of “one man, one vote”; the division of profit is not dependent on the equity share; the capital is variable, etc.
- The *main objective of the consumer communities* is to satisfy and to harmonize the common economic, social, and cultural needs and aims of the members operating as a non-profit co-operation. The economic profit generated and raised by the activities of the consumer communities can be regarded not as a final goal but as a tool for achieving further and higher aims. The final aim is not only the realization of the present ones, but that of the future objectives as well. Consequently, these communities try to concentrate not only on the economic performance and results, but also on the provision of social and cultural solutions as well. The main goal is not the maximization of profit for the shareholders. Actually, by satisfying the needs and realizing the aims of the members they also serve higher, public purposes.
- To reach their goals the consumer communities *are formed as a venture and work as a company*. They are present on the market on behalf of the members to provide them with the best products and highest level of service. The consumer communities are specialized in food retail, but they can be present on further retailer markets as well (e.g. finance, travelling, accommodation, etc.) depending on the size of the country and the consumer community.
- *Consumer communities are managed in a democratic way*. As mentioned above, they focus on people, consequently, their style of leadership is democratic. Consumer communities consist of consumers. It means that the members are independent consumers so the consumer communities aim to satisfy consumer needs. The leadership can be impeached by the consumers, not the shareholders. The management is democratic and direct as all the members are entitled to participate at the general assemblies (Euro Coop, CCW, ICA n.d.).

Consumer communities can be considered as innovative and alternative forms of communities supported by agriculture and they are defined in several ways, such as the following: *buying community, shopping-community, self-organizing consumer group, or community shopping group*. In the international scientific literature the most commonly used terms are the following: *buying community, buying groups, buying club, food co-op's, consumer food co-ops, consumer-farmer partnerships, community farms, community-producer partnership, local food buying groups, consumer cooperatives, Local Food Systems, etc.*

In this study I do use the term *buying community* which means the consumer communities organized from below and consisting of more local farmers, a civil organization or a little group of consumers organizing a food delivery and distribution system for themselves. There can be varied organizations that mainly work on civil bases and they are not profit-oriented.

Buying communities have no official definition in Hungary but the experts and authors who deal with the issue, such as Réthy K.-Dezsényi Z. (2013), TVE, Benedek-Balázs (2014), Szabó (2014), VP 2014-2020, Kujáni (2014), etc. agree that within these alternative and small scale, short food chains, the farmers and buyers form a community in a mutually beneficial, favourable way. In contrast with the practice in the USA and Switzerland, the buying communities typically work as non-profit or civil organizations. The primary advantage of the farmers and producers is that they can enter into a long-term relationship with the consumers, they can sell their high-quality products on the premises and consequently they can work in an optimal and cost-effective way. The advantage of the consumers is that they can access healthy and checked food contributing to the maintenance of good health and to the development of local economy. According to Dezsényi et al. (2013), the agriculture supported by communities represents a system, a producing and selling practice in which farmers can focus on the production of high-quality, ecologically-friendly and chemical-free food and they do not need to waste

time on searching for market or to pay logistic as well as delivery fees. They can produce for a stable consumer group building a long-term relationship with them based on mutual confidence, co-operation, solidarity and risk sharing through direct selling (takeover points, shops or home delivery). The consumer satisfaction is of utmost importance as the consumer can get local food deriving from guaranteed, tested sources and he/she can be a member of a special group. All these good practices may reform the more and more globalizing food consuming attitudes strengthening the identity and the community spirit. The Fókusz Öko Center (n.d.) of Marosvásárhely identifies urban buying communities (clubs) as marketing strategies: *“In the frame of these marketing strategies, the producer/farmer identifies an urban target group which can be a companionship, a group living at the same place (in the same block of flats or street) or working at the same work place respectively a group with common buying demands. The producer/farmer agrees with the buyers on the necessary products in advance and delivers them to the agreed address upon the agreed time. A buyer takes over the products and pays for them on behalf of the buying group”*.

The buying communities are the most dynamic food distributing systems among the agriculture groups supported by the communities because they can entirely adapt to the demands of consumers as the products do not need to be paid in advance and the orders need to be placed weekly. The demand is adapted to the consumer needs and not the converse. However, the risk for the farmers is much higher as it is not guaranteed that they can sell all their products through these channels. As a result, a very intensive communication and cooperation is required between the organizers and the farmers/producers so that the farmers/producers can plan. The responsibility of the organizers is quite high as they are in direct connection with the members of buying communities and the occasional buyers so they can be considered as contact persons between consumers and local farmers/producers.

The demand for the fresh, healthy, chemical-free and guaranteed food products is stronger and stronger both on the domestic and foreign markets. According to the Fókusz Öko Center (2010) of Marosvásárhely, it is not only a fashion but also the future of consumption. Ecological farming makes sustainable food producing possible. Certain groups of the conscious consumers form so-called buying communities obtaining most of their basic foods through this alternative, the short food channel. This so-called informal “do-it-yourself” activity organized from below seems to be stronger and stronger in Hungary as well. These groups work as communities and the members voluntarily and actively take part in the organization of common purchase and the operation of the network. According to Nagy (2012), the direct relationship formed between the local farmers and buyers means the key element of buying communities. In most cases, the founding members are neighbours, colleagues, friends or relatives. The community organizers order the typical seasonal vegetables, fruits, different processed foods (canned fruit, pickles, jams, etc.) from the partner farmers weekly. They take over the food at different takeover points such as plots, rectories, etc. Shops have been opened recently by the buying communities so that high quality local food can be available for a wider circle of consumers. The choice is much wider here for the members and other buyers (e.g. Budapest Net-bag Shop). Generally, members can purchase the products at a discount price at these community shops motivating the buyers to join the “net-bag” communities. Kálmán Kiss (2012), as a founding member of the “Net-bag” Club of Kiskunfélegyháza, in an interview to the Association of Conscious Buyers, has drawn the attention to the fact that in many cases the objectives and activities of the self-organized buying communities extend beyond the community purchase as the formation of the community and attitude by the community programs can be regarded as a general aim (Nagy, 2012). Erika Kármán, as a founding member of the “Net-bag” community of Budapest, also emphasizes the importance of the community-building power in the lives of the buying communities and she claims that *“there isn’t any greediness or interest of power about it; only the interest of the community makes it work, and it exists until the community maintains it”* (Perényi, 2010, p. 55).

According to the Kassai et al. (2016, p. 77) research results, the Hungarian local products have a significant positive impact on the whole local community and, furthermore, these quality products could have a positive effect on the region’s economic and social processes too:

- increase in local tax income;
- contribution to the expansion and maintenance of jobs;

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- the local delivery of raw materials creates safer sales;
- alternative income and diversification opportunities for conducting economic activities for local producers;
- development of local service industry and tourism.

Due to the concerns about the long-term sustainability of the globalized form of retail and the strengthening of health-conscious food consumer behaviour, in its rural development policy the EU focuses more on the popularization and development of the new types of Short Supply Chains promoting the marketing of the high-quality, home-made products of local producers. In Hungary, there is a growing demand for the formation and development of the network of short supply chains both from the supply and demand sides as a result of which to satisfy this demand in the Rural Development Program of Hungary of 2014-2020, the Thematic Basic Program of Short Supply Chain (REL) was made, in the frame of which 3.84 billion forints can be spent on these activities.

METHODS

In this study, I summarize the results of a previously conducted survey aiming to present the attitudes related to the general local foods and buying communities. I carried out my research in the following towns involving students: Esztergom, Kecskemét, Érd, and Csömör. When choosing the sample locations I found it very important to carry out the research at places where actively working buying communities can be found, as they are the new and innovative channels of short food supply chains. The data collection was successful. Besides the general evaluation of the surveys to discover the deeper relations and to plan further research, I analyzed the database of the survey with the help of statistical methods as well, namely I used the IBM SPSS Statistics 20 program.

During the prior survey, I managed to ask 561 people. As only 493 of them had a permanent address, these people formed the relevant target group from the point of view of the research. The survey was conducted between 18 and 24 April 2016. Although the sampling was voluntary and not representative, the aim was to demonstrate that the sample was as heterogeneous as possible, based on the demographic characteristics.

Working up the data, besides the general description, I wanted to discover the connections between the criteria with the help of the query analysis. I tried to find the possible relations among the variables applied in my research; so, if the relation is detected, how strong and determining it is. According to H₀, there are connections among the variables applied in the research. However, disregarding the H₀, significant relations could be detected. The existence of the relations are tested by the Pearson Chi-square. If the significance level of the sample/data (Asymp.Sig. (2-sided) is under 0.05%, it is still approved by the social sciences that there is a relation between the analyzed variables. To examine the strength of the relations I used the associative factors depending on the relations among the scales of variables:

- Nominal variables: Cramer's V sample (ranging between 0 and 1);
- Ordinal variables: Gamma sample (ranging between -1 and 1, showing the trends of the relations as well);
- Ordinal and nominal variables: Eta sample (ranging between 0 and 1) (Sajtos-Mitev, 2007).

The empirical research in the social studies has shown that there are rarely strong relations among variables. Consequently, I interpreted the strength of the relations according to the following:

- 0 - 0.199: weak relation
- 0.200 – 0.399: moderately strong relation
- 0.400 - : strong relation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nearly 36% of the respondents subject to the sample live in Csömör, 27% in Kecskemét, 21% in Esztergom, and 16 % in Érd. More men (61 %) were willing to fill in the surveys than women were. The average age of the sample was ranging between 38 and 47. I managed to involve a varied age group into the examination: the youngest respondent was 16 and the oldest one was 85 years old. I was

able to reach a wide range of respondents according to education, profession and income situation. Table 1 shows the general geographical and demographic characteristics as well as the names of the buying communities working in the relevant towns. The four towns (Kecskemét, Esztergom, Érd, Csömör) chosen from the 12 towns with buying communities registered by the Association of Conscious Buyers (TVE) have different social and economic characteristics as shown in the table below. It was important to know how the respondents in these urban and country places relate to the local foods and buying communities.

Table 1. *The general characteristics of the examined towns*

Sample location	Legal status of the town	Territory (km ²)	Residents (persons)	Rate of unemployment (%)	Total net income/person (Ft)	Working Buying Community
KECSKEMÉT	city with county rights	323	111 836	5.40	806 851	Net-bag of Kecskemét
ÉRD	city with county rights	61	63 993	2.80	852 384	Natural basket
ESZTERGOM	city	99	28 102	4.00	790 521	Little Basket Buying Community
CSÖMÖR	town	23	9 253	1.93	904 492	Food Chamber of Csömör
Country data	-	93 030	9 893 899	6.36	674 902	-

Data source: based on TEIR, 2014; TVE, 2016

Figure 1 shows the judgement of the importance of the factors influencing the food buying attitude of the respondents. The quality of food seems very important (63.1%), as well as the price (43.9%).

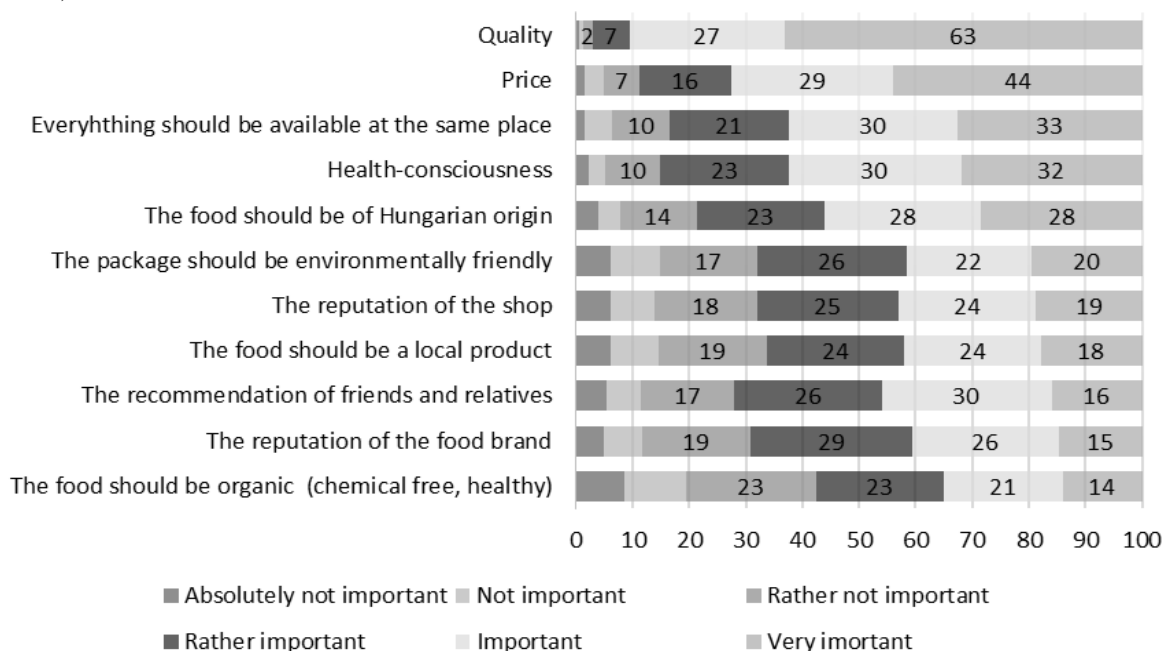


Figure 1. *The importance of factors influencing the buying attitudes (%)*

Source: author's own research, 2016

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For a little bit more than half of the respondents, it is important that all foods should be available at the same place and they consider themselves as conscious buyers. During the food purchase, the judgement of food consciousness significantly depends on the sex of the respondents ($\chi^2=31.464$; $df=5$; $p=0.000$). The relation is moderately strong (Cramer's $V=0.253$). In case of women, food consciousness is more important while buying food than in case of men; however, they consider it important as well. The Hungarian origin of the food is regarded as important by 28.4% of them. The food buying attitude of the respondents can be described as well-considered since most of the above mentioned factors were regarded as vital, if at a different rate, when making a buying decision.

42.5% of the respondents found it very important and 34.4% of them found it partially important to buy basic foods produced by local farmers (Figure 2). Among the examined towns, the respondents of Érd showed the least interest for the local food products, 32.0% of them thought that it was unimportant to consider the origin of the food when purchasing it. This may be related to the agglomeration effects of Budapest, as there is no significant difference between the educational and income status of the sample. Significant and moderately significant relations can be demonstrated between the preferences of local food, the environmentally conscious buying attitude and the demand for the availability of local food. The respondents who found it important to buy local food in their hometown pay significantly more attention to the environmentally friendly package when purchasing food ($\chi^2=84.368$; $df=10$; $p=0.000$) and to the organic origin of the relevant food ($\chi^2=63.698$; $df=10$; $p=0.000$). Furthermore, there is a very strong relation (Cramer's $V=0.436$) between the attitudes to the food of local and Hungarian origin, as well as the demands for local shops where they are available ($\chi^2=184.095$; $df=6$; $p=0.000$). Those respondents who prefer Hungarian products and food found it most important that there should be shops and/or selling points in their towns where the local, homemade, verifiable and guaranteed food with high nutrition value are available.

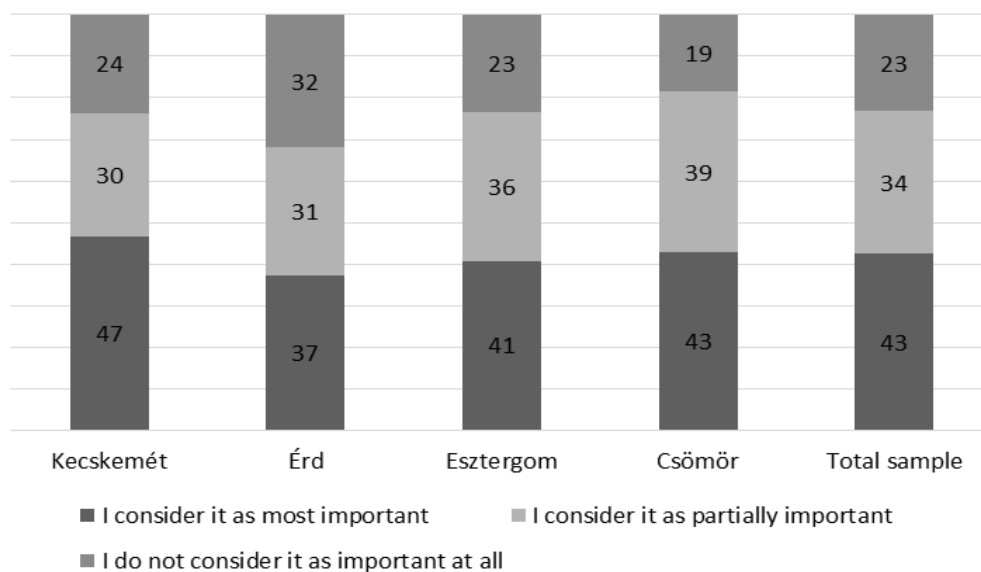


Figure 2. Demand for local food (%)

Source: author's own research, 2016

The respondents seem to show interest for local food shops where only Hungarian and local products can be available. 30.5% of the subjects to the interview consider it very important while 53.9% of them consider it partially important that this type of shops should be available in their hometown (Figure 3). The survey clearly shows that in spite of the hedonist consumer trends generated by the globalization and focusing on mass products, the demand of consumer layers requiring guaranteed, healthy and chemical-free local food deriving from verifiable producers are getting stronger and stronger. The respondents who need the availability of local food form a niche

market and they can be potential consumers of the products of local farmers/producers working in the local buying communities. However, the above-mentioned consumer segment demonstrates conscious and sustainable consumer attitudes while buying food, as proven by my analysis. Between the respondent attitudes toward the shops selling Hungarian and local foods and the buying attitudes there is a significant and moderately strong relation.

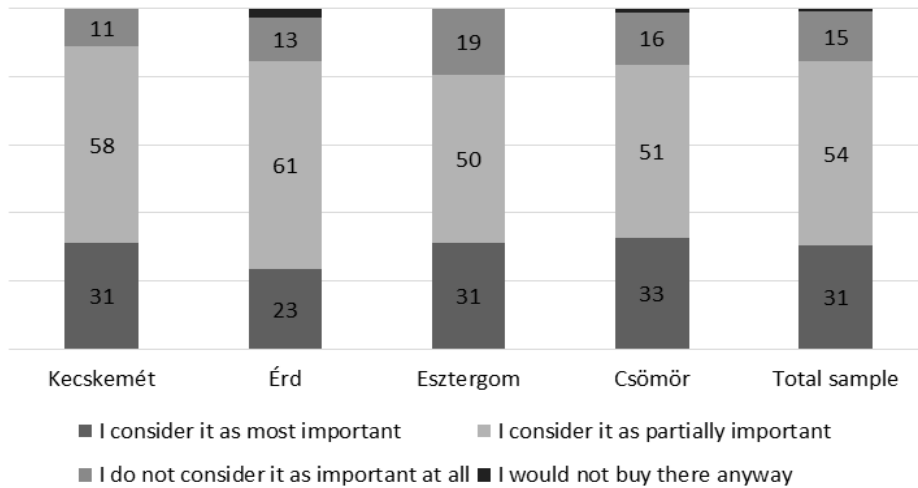


Figure 3. Demands for local shops specialized definitely in Hungarian and local products (%)
Source: author’s own research, 2016

The respondents who promote the opening of shops of this kind in their hometown admitted that they considered that the relevant food should be of Hungarian origin ($\chi^2=189.797$; $df=15$; $p=0.000$; Cramer’s $V=0.360$) or should be local ($\chi^2=151.494$; $df=15$; $p=0.000$; Cramer’s $V=0.322$). It should also be organic ($\chi^2=84.747$; $df=15$; $p=0.000$; Cramer’s $V=0.241$) and healthy ($\chi^2=94.653$; $df=15$; $p=0.000$; Cramer’s $V=0.254$). It was also important that the package should be environmentally friendly ($\chi^2=98.622$; $df=15$; $p=0.000$; Cramer’s $V=0.260$).

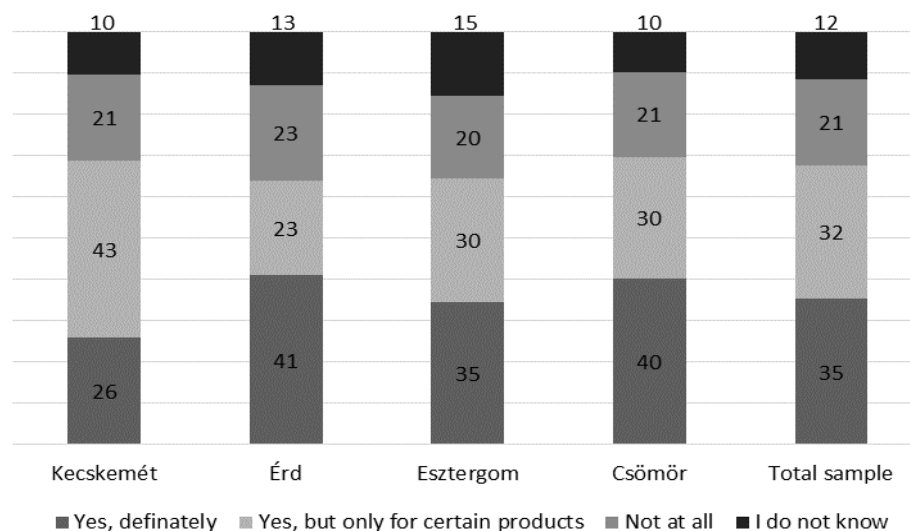


Figure 4. Are you willing to pay a little bit more for local food? (%)
Source: author’s own research, 2016

35.3% of the respondents are willing to pay more for local food while 32.3% of them are willing to pay more only for certain foods. 20.9% of them are not willing to pay more for local foods

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(Figure 4). The respondents who significantly prefer the opening of shops selling local food are willing to spend more money on basic foods such as fruits, vegetables, eggs, dairy products, meat and bakery products ($\chi^2=130.436$; $df=9$; $p=0.000$; Cramer's $V=0.298$).

At the level of the examined towns, the reputation of the buying communities are significantly different ($\chi^2=77.617$; $df=6$; $p=0.000$). Based on the Cramer's V sample, the relation is moderately strong (0,281). The respondents of Csömör are the best informed about the buying communities working in their hometown, and even more, some of them belong to these communities. The majority of the respondents of the other three towns have no information about the buying communities (Figure 5).

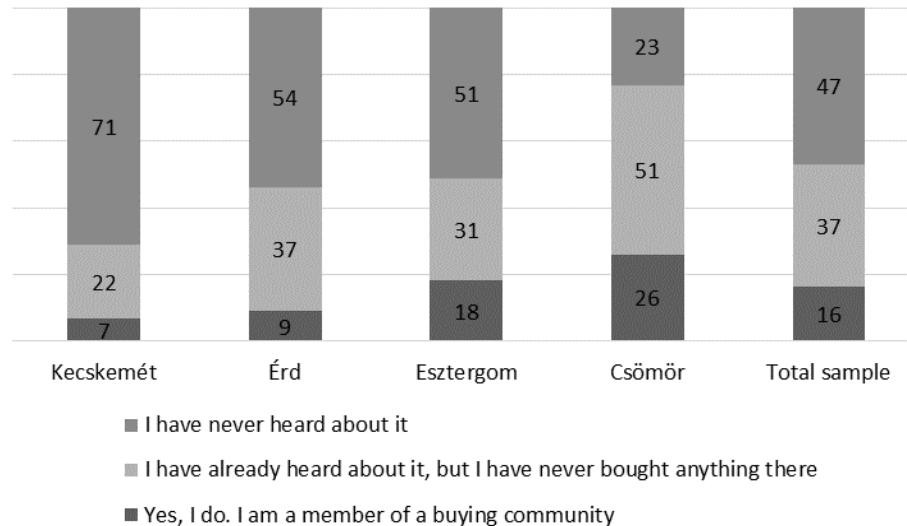


Figure 5. The reputation of local buying communities according to the respondents (%)
Source: author's own research, 2016

The reason for this may be that Csömör is a smaller town, and, as a result, the flow of new initiatives or services can get to the consumers much faster than in bigger settlements. The other three cities are much bigger than Csömör, and considering the fact that the buying communities basically function in a non-profit way they cannot devote much money to marketing communication. Consequently, their activities are popularized online and can reach only a smaller consumer segment.

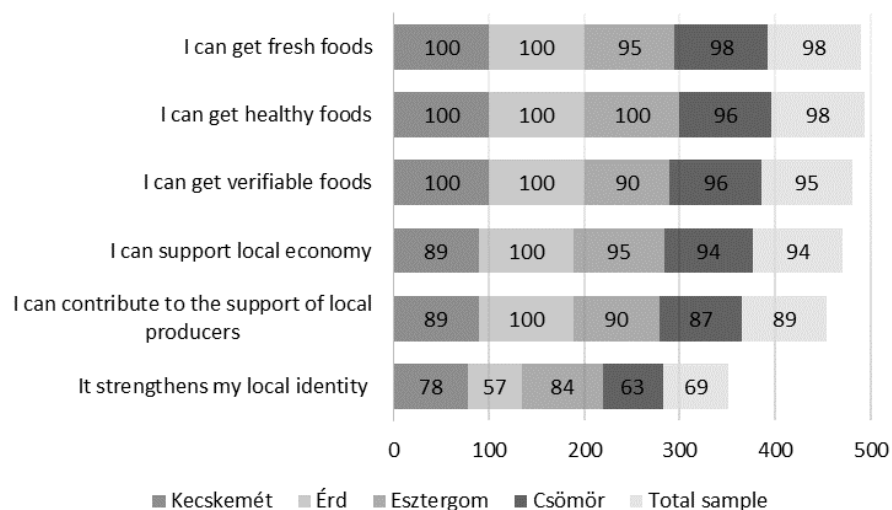


Figure 6. Why do you like buying in buying communities? (%)
Resource: author's own research, 2016

The respondents who purchase within the buying communities are aware of the fact that by buying local food they promote the local economy and farmers, besides getting healthy, verifiable food. These communities can largely contribute to the formation of the local identity as their programs have a community forming effect as well. 69.1% of the respondents purchasing in buying communities claim that belonging to such communities strengthens the local identity (Figure 6).

Women respondents prefer buying in buying communities because by promoting local food they can contribute to the support of local producers/farmers ($\chi^2=5.810$; $df=1$; $p=0.016$). The significant relation is moderately strong ($Eta=0.268$). We asked the respondents to tell how they felt being members of the community. The most commonly used adjectives were the following: “quality”, “confidence”, “local products”, “healthy”, “mutuality”, “community”, “friends...”. These buzzwords are totally in accordance with the principles of the agriculture supported by communities and that of the buying communities.

CONCLUSION(S)

Based on the surveys, it is obvious that a growing consumer segment shows interest for high-quality local food and the demand for the health-conscious as well as sustainable food purchase is stronger and stronger. In the case of the examined towns, there is no significant difference between the attitudes of urban or country respondents to local food. The consumer segments that are committed to the conscious and sustainable food purchase and food consumption can be clearly identified in all four towns. Although there were no significant differences between the attitudes of the respondents, it has been proven that the geographical environment, the typically urban or rural surroundings can influence the so-called food consuming behaviour. The so-called hedonistic, less conscious behaviour seems more typical of the respondents of Érd.

Based on the results of the survey, we can draw the conclusion that there is a latent and potential demand for the controllable, healthy and chemical-free local food. Both in urban and rural areas, the alternative and innovative food systems such as buying communities have a good reason for existence. In addition, alternative distribution channels are supported as the EU and Hungary both promote the formation of sustainable food supply networks and in their current rural development policies, they give priority to ensuring the direct relationship between producers and markets helping the availability of foods in the markets with a good value for money.

The buying community-type local food systems are not only sustainable from an environmental point of view but they can contribute to *the development of the local economy* playing an important role in the *development of local communities*.

As a continuation of the research with the collection of good practices and research carried out among further subjects, the formation of the role model of buying communities may be promoted as it can be considered as a guideline and an adaptable model for the creation and management of local food systems.

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