



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
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Where is the Food we need?

by Rafal Serafin, Poland

FEB
2023

of **Stories
Change**

*Connecting traditional knowledge and
innovations for fair and sustainable
food systems*

United Nations
Decade of
**FAMILY
FARMING**
2019-2028





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Writers

Alethea Kordor Lyngdoh, Bhargavi Nagendra, Brighton Govha, Diana Mapulanga, Edwin Abwino, Georgina Catacora-Vargas, Joseph Karangathi Njoroge, Kushal Poudel, Laura Tabet, Magdalene Amujal and Gillian Avako of Kulika, Nichola Hungerford, Preeti S. Virkar, Doon Valley, Rafal Serafin, Sarah Appiah, Shalini Pathi, Smita Magar, Sostain Moyo.

Technical Coordination

Nathalie Santini

Family Farming Knowledge Platform
Family Farming Engagement, Parliamentary
Networks and ComDev Initiatives Unit
Partnerships and UN Collaboration Division
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Zdravka Dimitrova

Agroecology Knowledge Hub
Scaling up Agroecology Initiative
Ecosystem approach to crop production intensification
Plant Production and Protection Division
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Editorial team

Doug Reeler & Cristina Temmink
Barefoot Guide Connection

Layout and graphic design

Ricardo Rivera, Jorge Leiva & Érika Ortega Sanoja

Prosperous and Inclusive Rural Societies Regional Initiative,
FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

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Stories of change: Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

*Cover photo by Fundacja
Partnerstwo dla Środowiska*

Where is the Food we need?

by Rafal Serafin, Poland

It never ceases to amaze me why it's so difficult to buy locally produced food that is tasty, seasonal, fresh and chemical-free directly from farmers. Why do government policies and programmes always seem to favour big agro-business and supermarket culture?

It's Thursday. I'm on my way to collect this week's food order. I'm running late again. My wife, Marta, made the order on-line on Tuesday, but has taken our daughters to horse-riding.

The short drive to the Rohatyna tavern, where the Liszki Basket Club has its collection point is always an opportunity to reflect on where we are with access to locally-produced food in Poland. Increasing the contribution of locally-produced food in Poland's food economy has been a concern of mine for many years now: first as a campaigner and now as an IT and organisational solutions provider for those wanting to establish or grow local markets for locally produced food in their area.

Unlike much of Europe, Poland is a powerhouse of small farms. With its 1.3 million mostly small farmers, Poland should be awash with locally-produced food. But that's just not the case. There are 130.000 farms in my region of Malopolska. Most are small, family operations – less than 4 hectares in size, often fragmented in several pieces and focused on producing for their own

needs. There's lots of part-time farming and important food traditions. These are holdings that survived the attempts of the communists to nationalise farmland and create state farms after World War II.

Most farmers produce primarily for their own needs because they can't connect to the consumer who wants to buy their products. At the same time, supermarkets would have us believe that there is no alternative to what they have to offer. And the supermarkets in my area in and around Krakow are certainly NOT focused on offering food produced by Malopolska farmers. They would rather convert them into their customers.

The Liszki Basket is a possible solution. Located just outside of Krakow, it operates as a kind of virtual marketplace, where you can buy products directly from farms in the area. Just as in a physical market, each week farmers put on offer what they have to sell. Consumers, who have joined the Club, can order on-line and choose a collection point. In these Covid times, there is also home-delivery. But my family always likes to collect in person from the Rohatyna tavern. This week, Marta did the ordering and my task is to collect and pay for the order. We are consumers who have been buying regularly through the Club for nearly five years. It's a once-a-week domestic ritual for us now.

But why only once a week? Perhaps I can talk to Dagmara who started the Club and has been nurturing it ever since. Once a week is not enough. I had to go to Biedronka – the local supermarket just a few days ago and ended up buying vegetables. Couldn't wait till Thursday. We could and should be buying from the Club at least twice a week.

Difficult beginnings

When Dagmara moved to the village of Kaszow, just outside of Krakow, she wanted to have

access to food produced by local farmers. Eating locally produced food seemed the best way of assuring quality, freshness and authenticity. It stands to reason that farmers keep the best for themselves and their families. She managed to persuade a group of 5 or 6 farmers from the Liszki area to sell part of what they produced through what would become for them a new distribution and sales channel.



Rohatyna tavern – Liszki Basket collection point. Photo by Rafal Serafin

Barbara and Krystyna, who are today stalwarts of the Liszki Basket¹, were not convinced to begin with. They never aspired to setting up businesses or trading, but they were interested in some extra income from selling what they already produced and very much interested in finding ways to involve their children who had moved to the city and turned their back on the part-time farming family traditions. The Liszki Basket has given them these things and more. Krystyna has been selling regularly also at a farmers market in Krakow, attracting customers to the Liszki Basket, whereas Barbara no longer gets up to get the 6 am bus to clean offices in Krakow. She's focused on producing different flavoured versions of her pickled gherkins, which

now generate a regular income. Her husband has adapted the kitchen and built storage. And her son helps out with the marketing.

Having also moved to Kaszow with my family, I helped Dagmara turn her Liszki Basket idea into a reality as part of my work at an environmental NGO. But it was Dagmara who had to interest local farmers in the scheme on the one hand, and on the other to cajole all our friends to buy regularly from the farmer group. There was no software. Just the telephone and email, coupled with organising an informal collection point on Krystyna's farm, located in the middle of our village of Kaszow. It was not easy. Because just a few years ago, our village was seen by Cracovians as being in the middle of nowhere, whereas local farmers were suspicious about city folks.

We don't want to get into any formalised selling system, farmers told us. We have enough problems with sanitary inspectors, tax inspectors and other types of inspectors poking their nose into our affairs. And anyway, we only deal with people we know. That's what the farmers told us. As local food advocates, we were astounded to discover that regulations prevented farmers from processing and selling food from their farms to customers. To do so, they had to register as businesses and lose their farmer status. That was new to me. So, we connected with the Agricultural Chamber and campaigned successfully with them and other local food advocates for policy and regulatory changes that now allow farmers to process and sell their products directly to customers. There were dozens of meetings with parliamentarians and government officials, media events, conferences and awareness raising in schools. It's all taken for granted today.

¹ More about the Liszki Basket: Film: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS3jq6fr_80, Weekly shop: <https://zakupy.ko-szyklisiecki.pl>, Good practice description: <https://prostoodrolnika.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Buyers-Club-good-practiceSept2019.pdf>, IT PLM software: <https://local-food.pl/en/it-plm-software/>, Short food supply chain solutions: <https://local-food.pl>.

Competing in the market-place

Fast-forward 5 years. Today, there are over 30 farmers selling and more than 400 consumers regularly buying over a 100 products via a sophisticated software platform that was developed and tested by the farmers and consumers coming together to form what is today the Liszki Basket Club. It's a pretty slick operation today using an IT platform – you couldn't manage all the transactions and processes with just a pencil and piece of paper. The IT platform is the key in that it enables all the intermediary functions of packaging, logistics, settling transactions, marketing, collection points, quality assurance and product development to be shared among the producers and consumers involved. There's no need for volunteers as in food coops or community supported agriculture.



My order this week – ready for collection. Photo by Rafal Serafin

But increasing sales and keeping costs in check continues to be a challenge. This means that Barbara, Krystyna and the other farmers involved are now not only tracking their own costs and sales volumes on the IT platform, but

are figuring out what can be done with others to increase sales volumes without resorting to intermediaries. In other words, what would it take for my family to buy more from them?

So, still on my way to collect this week's food order, I couldn't help feeling pleased with myself as I arrived at Rohatyna. Thanks to the Liszki Club, my family has had regular access to locally-produced and healthy food. I feel as if I know all the 30 or so farmers involved, so I know who is producing the food. Typhoon potatoes from Krystyna, pickled gherkins from Barbara, organic apples from Adam, traditional hams and sausage from Artur and seasonal vegetables from Łukasz.



Photo by Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Srodowiska

Innovating the hard way

I shouted out a greeting to the young girl at the collection point and made straight for the wooden crate marked with my number and filled with our order. I loaded everything into my basket and bags and made my way to the desk to pay for my order. The IT platform enabling Liszki Basket operations is pretty much taken for granted. It was developed and rolled out over several months through a process of the initial group of producers and consumers working with software developers and community organisers,

including Dagmara and me. The software is constantly being adapted to changing needs and is being provided alongside organisational solutions to support Basket initiatives in other parts of Poland and perhaps also internationally.

“Why are they so slow to introduce on-line payment?” I thought to myself. “I really must talk to Dagmara.” In other parts of Poland, the software platform has been adapted to support payments on-line and offers a whole range of new features. Having waited my turn in the queue, payment took just a few seconds. For the girl at the desk, I was just one of 400+ customers. I couldn't remember her name, though I remember Dagmara telling me she was the daughter of our Liszki Basket farmers. It's great to have the farmers' families involved. And even better for me to be seen primarily as a consumer rather than initiator or founder. Dagmara is also in the background these days. It's the farmers and their products that are front-and-centre. But Dagmara is the one that still makes things happen.



It's Thursday - boxes ready for collection. Photo by Rafal Serafin

I'm sure there is good reason why they're not rushing into on-line payments. The Liszki Basket Association, which operates the Liszki Basket and has rights to the software, brings

together the farmers involved. They're very good at protecting their interests, especially when it comes to introducing improvements. We need to talk through the risks, costs and benefits of introducing on-line payments and trialling the logistics module we have been working on together. Perhaps there's something I haven't considered. This is important because for advocates of locally-produced food, the task now is to figure out how farmers can collaborate better with each other and with consumers to outcompete supermarkets and their expensive marketing of industrialised food that too often masquerades as locally-produced food.

Better software and on-line marketing is part of the solution, but only part. Much better to think in terms of what it would take for families like mine to buy less or nothing from the supermarket, and buy instead from the Liszki Club. For my family, on-line marketing will not make a difference. But buying twice a week might.



Janusz supplies traditional bread. Photo by Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Srodowiska

What pleases me most is that there are so many advocates of locally-produced food these

days. More and more farmers are interested in selling directly to consumers. In turn, more and more consumers are taking food seriously. It's no longer an ideological thing. The focus now is on working out practical organisational and collaborative solutions that put farmers and consumers in charge rather than intermediaries. The government has included an emphasis on markets for local food in its priorities. That's what Covid has done. It's shaken the food system as we've known it to date. It's not just efficiency in providing cheap, year-round food that now matters. It's also food security and adoption of healthy diets. Access to food and connecting consumers with those who produce it is now important. Many are realising that it's good to have farmers in your community.

Not such a rosy future for small farmers

But can the growing interest in local food be turned into increased sales in the Liszki Basket? Running the Liszki Basket continues to be a struggle. The onslaught of supermarket culture is hard to deal with, especially as it has taken on the rhetoric of locally-produced food in what is now pretty aggressive marketing. Portuguese-owned retail is Poland's largest supermarket chain with the German and French ones not far behind. These companies control Poland's food retail market with multi-million dollar advertising and expansion to rural areas with the introduction of smaller shops. Now they're promoting local, fresh and organic food in just the same way the Liszki Basket was just a few years earlier.

A new portuguese owned retail supermarket opened up a couple of years ago near the Liszki Basket collection point, along with the outward sprawl of Krakow that is turning our rural area into suburbia. The threat to the Liszki Basket is tangible, irrespective of national government declarations that locally-produced food and the

farmers that produce it are a priority. The grant-aid to support local food initiatives, along with tax and other incentives for small farmers, won't make much of a difference in the short term. It's the marketplace here and now that matters.



Unlike much of Europe, Poland is a powerhouse of small farms. With its 1.3 million mostly small farmers, Poland should be awash with locally-produced food. But that's just not the case.

The Liszki Basket offers something different to the local supermarket, which always seems to be full of customers. The Basket is all about access to fresh, authentic, seasonal and tasty food of known origin, putting money in the pockets of those farming in our area – keeping them in farming, keeping our traditions and landscapes alive! We're talking about decent livelihoods and rural living. I just don't believe in the big chains rhetoric. They just paid a huge fine for mislabelling imported food as Polish-produced food. Food fraud is the order of the day. One thing I know for sure is that they don't see our local Liszki farmers as suppliers. They're more interested in turning them into consumers. As consumers we will lose also if our farmers disappear. But convenience coupled with marketing are big things. Convenience trumps everything.

I wondered about the other Liszki Basket customers – how are they thinking about these things? Are they also getting frustrated?

Perhaps we can find ways of making the Liszki Basket more convenient. What will it take to get them involved in testing out our new logistics solution based on making better use of all the transport and storage resources in the control of the producers and consumers in our Club? What about all those people from Krakow who have moved out of the City. Certainly, the farmers involved will have ideas as many of them sell also to shops, the farmers' market in Krakow and organise on-farm sales. Another reason to talk to Dagmara.



Artur continues the tradition of cold cuts, which have made Liszki famous. Photo by Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Srodowiska

That brings us to Dagmara. She's the one who started the Liszki Basket Club and is still very much shaping its operations because she is always talking with the farmers and the consumers. She's not an intermediary, but rather

sees her role as serving or nurturing the Basket. And she's always ready to work with me in trying to help others who are trying to initiate Basket-like local markets. Many of our local governments are now getting involved and ready to make the necessary investments in mobilising farmers and consumers, software and organisational arrangements. That's another consequence of Covid. It's good to have farmers farming in your jurisdiction.

Reframing the intermediary

Until recently, no-one really stood up for the small farmer. And over the past 20 years, we've lost much of our small-scale food processing capability. Consumers celebrated the advent of supermarkets and supermarket culture after years of communism and food shortages. But now consumers are taking more of an interest in what they eat and where their food comes from. But this is not enough to mainstream markets for locally-produced food in our food system. Our Liszki Basket experience suggests start-up funding is only part of the story. You need a Dagmara with an interest in creating and nurturing the market through organising collaborations between farmers and also between farmers and consumers. That's not easy. You need IT tools to enable decentralised transactions, logistics and marketing that keep producers and consumers in charge rather than intermediaries. Software solutions make this possible, but they will not be sufficient. You also need some form of legal entity under the control of the Basket that enables tracking and processing many transactions without having to resort to an intermediary or causing bottlenecks. All this has to be in compliance with prevailing tax and sanitary regulations. No-one said creating local markets was easy. It's even more difficult, when you are up against the supermarket culture, where it is the intermediary

who shapes the market. But the solution needs to be people-centred that's for sure.

The challenge now is how to compete in the marketplace by growing in scale and impact without resorting to intermediaries who tend to extract the lion's share of the value generated.



Tadeusz and his family is a Liszki Basket stalwart. Photo by Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Srodowiska

In reframing agricultural and rural development policy, the Polish government is now seeking to work out how to replicate initiatives such as the Liszki Basket across Poland. What is still not fully appreciated is that the power of the Liszki Basket, or more precisely the farmers involved in it, comes from the fact that it is farmers like Barbara, Artur and Krystyna who have become visible to consumers. Households like mine know all the farmers involved and all the products they produce. We have our preferences, but we can always choose. In turn, the farmers know their consumers. Almost everyone who was involved at the beginning is still involved - buying regularly. I don't recall an occasion where someone made an order and did not turn up to collect and pay for it. There's tremendous loyalty, but it is based more on mutual benefit and a sharing of risks

and costs than on a joint organisational structure such as a cooperative.

Put simply, those involved extract individual benefit from joint or collective action. But to compete in the marketplace, the Liszki Basket needs to constantly grow and adapt. The IT platform co-created with farmers, consumers and IT people is an opportunity for this. It's a platform because it operates like a virtual farmers' market. It provides for variety and can be scaled in terms of the range of products offered for sale, the numbers of producers and consumers involved and sales volumes. But it's the farmers and consumers who must be in control rather than intermediaries. That's why local governments and other organisations that don't aspire to profiting as transaction intermediaries need to take on the role played by Dagmara. The value and benefit stems from local food markets – rather than supermarkets - growing and prospering around us.

As director of the Polish Environmental Partnership Foundation, which had received a large grant from the Swiss Government, I was very visible in the first years of the project. With Dagmara, it was the same. She had developed the initial concept of the Basket and helped to secure the money to get things going. The producers (and consumers) involved were pretty much invisible at the start. That's all changed. Both Dagmara and I as initiators and shapers are pretty much invisible and taken for granted today. It is the farmers, like Barbara and Krystyna, who are visible, along with their products. They are pretty much in charge. The focus is not on grant-aid or subsidies, but on improving sales. That's why we'll succeed in working out how to introduce a second market day, along with on-line financial transactions. But it will mean working out together the best solution. There's a good reason why it hasn't happened yet.



Stanisława is a Liszki Basket producer. Photo by Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Srodowiska

The key has been to make the invisible more visible. When something's invisible we can't see it, even when we look. We don't know what we don't know. Making organisations, relationships, interactions, assumptions, and individuals more visible means freeing them from their assumptions and the assumptions of others. It's about the rules of the game. Once these become visible, they can be changed. It's when the rules are invisible that we are prisoners of what we don't know.

But the Basket is not just about making farmers and their products more visible, it's also about understanding the role of the intermediary and also making that role more visible in order to find ways of sharing it among buyers and sellers. With new IT technology solutions, social media, circular and solidarity economy and small-scale food processing solutions, local markets for locally-produced food with many-to-many transactions can be scaled as never before with no single individual or organisation 'in charge'.

Transforming our food system

What is now at stake is not just a logistical or business re-arrangement, but a paradigm shift

or transformation of the way our food system can operate. The key lies in providing an IT platform that offers ways of decentralising and sharing the intermediary functions in ways that cultivate collective self-confidence and agency among the producers and consumers who have hitherto had little or no voice. Local food systems, like the Liszki Basket, are becoming a counterpoint to the hierarchical, centralised command-and-control solutions so favoured by agro-business and foreign-owned supermarket chains. By competing in the marketplace the Liszki Basket, and other initiatives like it, are demonstrating that horizontal or decentralised alternatives to business-as-usual are not just desirable, but possible. This is an obvious threat to corporate culture and a real difficulty for government bureaucratic culture, which struggles to let complex systems sort themselves out with their emphasis on interactive and adaptive learning.



The Liszki Basket organises also direct selling days. Photo by Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Srodowiska

Yet with our million or so farmers now more visible than ever, changing consumer preferences, coupled with a recognition that the landscapes, biodiversity and cultural and natural heritage we cherish, we have a real chance in Poland to reorient our food systems to something that is more horizontal and more sustainable. By treating our small and part-time farmers as a resource and opportunity as

opposed to a burden and problem, we can create the conditions for many Liszki Basket initiatives across Poland. If farmers remain invisible and taken for granted, it will all be business as usual with agro-business, supermarket culture and big government, tightening their grip on the food market, asserting that local markets for locally-produced food are simply not viable. But the fact that the farmers themselves in Poland no longer want to stay invisible represents our best chance for a food system in Poland that is not just more sustainable than what we have now, but one which provides us with the fresh, tasty, seasonal, chemical-free food we want as consumers.

Bringing home this week's groceries from the Basket made me think of all those others in Poland and around the world who have had the chance to buy directly from farmers. There's more and more of us. It was somehow reassuring to think that there are so many farmers and

consumers today trying to work out new ways of growing, making available or accessing locally-produced food. I was certainly not alone. Self-organising local food arrangements need to proliferate in ever new ways and become more of a mainstream, so as to contribute to climate protection, soil restoration, water retention, community resilience and all those things they talked about in New York at the UN Food Summit. The need is for more space for interaction and learning between those involved in trying to do the same thing as us in the Liszki Basket in different parts of Poland and indeed in different countries and contexts around the world. That reminded me. "I must contact my friend Choongo in Lusaka to find out more about how he is dealing with mobile-phone transactions in his farmers' market in Lusaka. They might have some good advice for our farmers in the Liszki Basket."

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