

SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS: KEY CONCEPTS, BENEFITS, RISKS, EUROPEAN UNION SUPPORT, MODELS FROM ROMANIA, STRATEGIES OF DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Short food supply chains represent an alternative channel to the classic food distribution system. Creating viable food supply chains is a challenge facing society today. This article explores the concept of short food supply chains, their emergence and impact on local economies, sustainability and consumer behaviour. Reviewing the literature and theoretical frameworks, the article elucidates the benefits and challenges associated with short supply chains, including increased food quality, reduced carbon footprint and increased community resilience. In addition, an analysis of EU rural development policies is made and the importance of consumer awareness regarding the future development directions of short food supply chains is highlighted.

Key words: *short food supply chains, local economies, distribution system*

INTRODUCTION

The notion of a "short food supply chain" envisages a model of food distribution in which producers and consumers interact directly, with the help of a small number of intermediaries.

These chains may include local markets, farms that sell products directly to consumers, agricultural cooperatives, or other forms of commerce that avoid the traditional distribution channel [3, 9].

The notion of a short food supply chain has started to be used in the agricultural and food context more recently, with the growing interest in food sustainability and promoting local and regional products [8, 27]. The term has gained popularity among agricultural and food researchers, practitioners, and public discussions of how food is produced and distributed [28].

Even though the direct sale from producer to the consumer has been known and practised for a long time, the concept of "short food supply chain" comes to describe this food valorization procedure in a much more coherent way from the point of view of transparency and of viability [21,4, 16, 26].

As the origin and traceability of food products, and sustainable production methods have become important topics for consumers, interest in the notion of a "short food supply chain" has simultaneously increased [5, 6, 15]. In this way, it can be stated that short food supply chains best illustrate the alternative to the traditional food valorization model, promoting a closer connection between producers and consumers [19, 20, 23].

This study aims to analyze short food supply chains, SFSC, regarding the following aspects: concepts, benefits, risks, support from the European Union, models from Romania, impact on local economies, sustainability and consumer behaviour and strategies of development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Analyzing the theoretical or conceptual framework that provides the overall framework for short supply chains involves a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to understanding the context, processes and impact of these chains on local rural economies, sustainability and consumer behaviour [14, 18].

In the framework of this research, the existing literature related to short food supply chains follows their operation and impact on some relevant aspects related to sustainability, economic efficiency, social equity, product quality and the impact on local communities. The benefits and challenges associated with short supply chains were considered, including increased food quality, reduced carbon footprint (by reducing transport distances) economic sustainability challenges (by removing intermediaries producers can get more value for their products) and social sustainability (producers develop new socially embedded relationships based on interaction with the direct consumers of their products based on common goals and interests), but also the community's increased resistance to new.

Analyzing short supply chain methodological frameworks can provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how these chains operate and their impact on various aspects of society and the environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Key concepts of short food supply chains

Some key concepts characterize these short food value chains in terms of how they are made and implemented [10, 17, 22, 31].

-Geographic proximity: this consists of reducing the physical distance from the place of production to the place of sale of food and implicitly promoting local products.

-Direct relationships: promote transparency and exchange of information between producers and consumers that increase trust between parties.

-Promoting the local economy: these short channels for the valorization of food products support the marketing of local products and bring benefits to producers and implicitly to local communities.

-Product diversity: a short food supply chain enables consumers to have access to varied, fresh and high-quality local products.

-Food quality: because short supply chains eliminate potential intermediaries between producers and consumers, they benefit from fresher and better quality products.

-Sustainability: short food supply chains have a major economic, social and environmental impact, helping to increase producers' incomes, support local communities and reduce the ecological footprint.

-Respect for the environment: the reduction of the transport distance has the benefit of a much-reduced carbon footprint and implicitly, to increased sustainability.

-Inclusiveness and equity: short food supply chains have two components: an economic one through which they provide opportunities for small producers to capitalize on their products and a social one offering the possibility of reducing inequalities that exist especially in rural areas.

-Supporting small and family farming: short distribution channels have a major impact on family farms and small producers in the sense that they have the opportunity to capitalize on their products without the pressure of intermediaries who would artificially raise prices.

-Community resilience: Short food supply chains come to support and strengthen rural communities based on direct interactions and cooperation between food producers and their beneficiaries.

These concepts represent the essence of the short-channel idea of distribution and valorization of local products sustainably and responsibly for the development of local communities. (Fig.1).

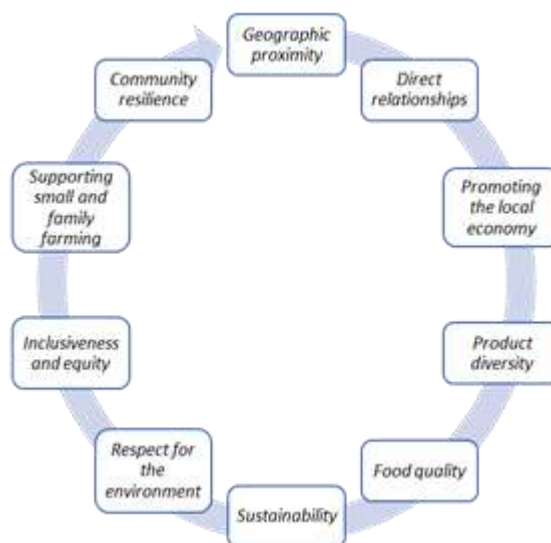


Fig. 1. Short Food Supply Chain- Key concepts
Source: Own determination.

Benefits of implementing short food supply chains

Short food supply chains have a particularly important role in the development of the rural economy, for the consolidation of small farmers, offering the possibility of obtaining benefits for both parties involved: agricultural producers manage to capitalize on their products obtained without the pressure of intermediaries, and consumers receive fresh products, of quality and at fair prices (Fig. 2) [35, 36, 39, 40, 41]:

-Supporting local producers: short food supply chains through local outlets give small local producers the chance to market their products directly, allowing them to increase their income.

-Employment growth: the emergence and development of this type of distribution channel also offers real benefits through the creation of new jobs at the level of the rural area in the sectors of production, processing or sale of locally obtained products

-Stimulating rural tourism: In addition to the services associated with rural tourism (accommodation, meal services or leisure), local markets or fairs that capitalize on the local products of small farmers can represent points of attraction for tourists or visitors to rural areas.

-Community strengthening: short food supply chains, on the one hand, can strengthen social ties in rural areas based on interactions and direct links between producers and consumers, and on the other hand, can support local cultural identity by promoting local traditions and crafts.

-Reducing dependence on long supply chains: short channels for the valorization of local food, whose principle is the elimination of intermediaries from the agri-food supply chain, represent a viable alternative to the classic agri-food chain. At the same time, the development of local markets in rural areas reduces the dependence on external intermediaries.

-Environmental sustainability: shortening food supply chains brings a major benefit to the environment by reducing carbon emissions due to shortening the transport

distance of agri-food products to the point of utilization.

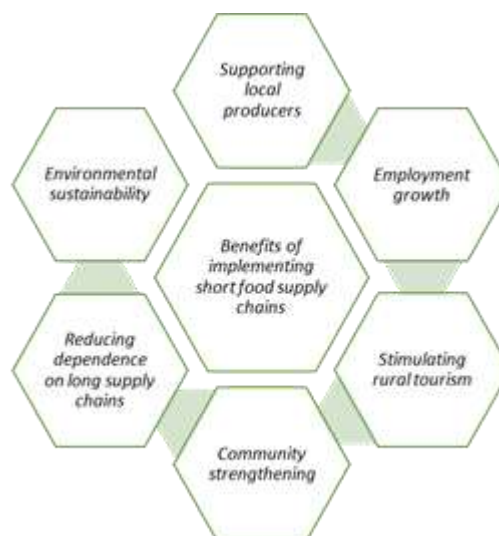


Fig. 2. Short Food Supply Chain- Benefits
Source: Own determination.

Potential risks to producers brought by the implementation of short food supply chains

Even though short food supply chains offer economic, social and environmental benefits to farmers, there may also be some risks that can be associated with this type of harnessing local produce, such as (Fig.3) [32]:

-Vulnerability to climate conditions and extreme events: due to climate change, extreme weather phenomena (drought, floods or hail) may occur that directly affect small producers who capitalize on their production through short chains and implicitly the availability of food on local markets may be endangered.

-Dependence on local production conditions: depending on the location of the farms in the territory, on the local production conditions, there is the possibility that some agri-food products are not disposable or are only available during certain periods, which can reduce the diversity of products available for capitalization through short supply chains.

-Economic risk for producers: small producers who capitalize on their production through these short capitalization chains may be more vulnerable compared to classic capitalization chains due to the economic risks they may be exposed to (increase in input prices, the possibility of having access to technology, etc.)

-Limited production and distribution capacity: due to the fact that these short distribution channels mainly involve small farmers, who have limited production capacities and obtain relatively small quantities of agri-food products, problems may arise in meeting consumer demand or in ensuring the continuity of products.

-Food quality and safety: even if the short capitalization chain offers the possibility of higher transparency regarding the knowledge of the origin of the products, there is a potential risk regarding food safety, and compliance with the regulations of their production, transport and handling.

-Reliance on interpersonal and social relationships of producers: one of the characteristics of short food supply chains is the direct relationship between producers and consumers that is created over time. This interpersonal link, for various reasons, can be affected and can negatively influence the operation of the supply chain.

-Competition with traditional supply chains: because short supply chains are based on small producers, it is sometimes difficult to compete with traditional food supply chains regarding price and accessibility, affecting their viability and sustainability.

Even if these risks are possible, short food supply chains can be managed in such a way that the negative impact is reduced as much as possible, while enhancing the beneficial effect of this sustainable supply model.



Fig. 3. Short Food Supply Chain - Risks for producers
 Source: Own determination.

The influence of short food supply chains on consumer behaviour

Shortening food supply chains can play an important role in changing consumption behaviour and promoting a healthier, more sustainable and more responsible eating pattern [11, 25, 7]. With the implementation of short food supply chains, the consumption behaviour of beneficiaries can be changed and positively influenced through a series of aspects related to education and valorization of locally produced food through sustainable and ethical production practices (Fig. 4).

-Awareness and education: short food supply chains provide the opportunity to educate consumers about food provenance, production processes and environmental impact. This can increase consumer awareness and lead them to make more informed and responsible decisions about their diet. Consumers can get information about how the food they buy is grown or produced.

-Valorizing local and seasonal foods: by promoting local and seasonal foods, short supply chains can change consumers' perceptions of what is available and acceptable in their diet. Consumers can begin to appreciate and value local and seasonal products for their superior quality, freshness and taste.

-Preference for fresh and high-quality products: short supply chains offer fresh, high-quality and sometimes organic or artisanal food products. Consumers are becoming more interested in foods with high nutritional value and prefer local products.

-Promoting direct relationships with producers: short supply chains connect consumers directly with local producers. This personal interaction can build trust and loyalty with producers and foster a sense of community and belonging.

-Support sustainable and ethical practices: short food supply chains often encourage sustainable and ethical farming and food practices. Consumers can be motivated to choose products that are grown and produced in a socially and environmentally responsible manner.

-Revaluing food and production processes: by being directly involved in the food purchasing

process, consumers can develop a greater appreciation for the value of food and the work of producers. This can lead to a change in consumer mindsets regarding food waste and an understanding of its impact on supply chains.

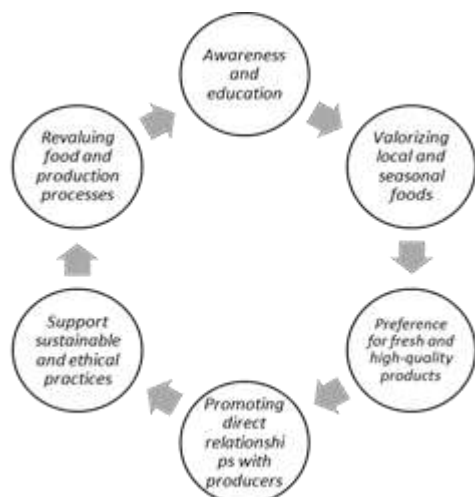


Fig. 4. Short Food Supply Chain- Impact on consumer behaviour

Source: Own determination

The EU support for the development of Short Food Supply Chain

Smart and competitive short supply chains are included in the EU rural development policy, under priority 3: "Promoting the organisation of the food chain, including processing and marketing of agricultural products, animal welfare and risk management in agriculture", through Focus Area 3A: "Improving the competitiveness of primary producers by better integrating them into the agri-food chain through quality schemes, adding value to agricultural products, promoting local markets and short supply circuits, groups and organisations of producers and inter-professional organisations".

Thus, in the European Union there is a variety of alternative models of food supply chains that reflect the diversity and complexity of EU member regions and economies: *local markets and agricultural fairs* that provide spaces for local producers to sell directly to consumers, promoting local produce and creating direct links between farmers and the community; *buyer groups* that organize to purchase agricultural products directly from local farms or agricultural cooperatives, cutting out

middlemen and promoting direct relationships; *regional distribution associations or organizations* dealing with the collection and distribution of local products, facilitating access to larger markets and improving the visibility of local producers; *Urban sourcing hubs* are urban logistics centers that facilitate the collection, packaging and distribution of local food products to urban consumers; *online direct selling platforms* where producers register and can sell their products directly to consumers, cutting out traditional middlemen.

These alternative models of food supply chains show current EU trends towards traceability, transparency and supporting local producers. They address existing EU environmental concerns and promote the direct link between producers and consumers for the sustainable development of rural communities. [24, 30].

Models of short food supply chains in Romania

In Romania, short supply chain models are increasingly popular, with increasing awareness of their advantages, both for consumers, local producers and the environment. More and more farmers, producers and consumers have engaged in such models, opening small farms, participating in local markets, establishing direct collaborations between producers and consumers or organizing community networks for direct food distribution.

In 2008, the ASAT Association (Association for the Support of Rural Agriculture) started initially as an informal group of consumers together with a local producer, through the implementation of a community-supported agriculture pilot project [2]. Community-supported agriculture is a partnership between a farmer and a group of consumers, based on a mutual commitment regarding the duration of the collaboration, the payment of a subscription and the distribution of agricultural products. Consumers pay a portion of the annual subscription cost in advance, supporting production costs and generating financial stability for the small farmer. In this way, the farmer is supported for an entire season by a group of consumers

who receive a weekly basket of vegetables from his garden. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development highlighted ASAT as a model of good practices of the short food chain, as the first successful step of implementing community-supported agriculture.

"The Peasant's Box" is a community-supported agriculture project that has been operating in Romania since 2012. It is a meeting place between local producers and consumers from cities [13]. Manufacturers offer their products in the form of "boxes" that have been put together to feed a family. The contents of each box are fixed (consumers cannot choose the contents of the box) and may vary according to the seasons of the year. Boxes are delivered periodically: some are delivered weekly (vegetables or dairy) and others are delivered monthly (meat). Also, other boxes are delivered annually, on the occasion of certain holidays.

At the regional level, the Rural Development Research Platform Association implemented the "Taste of Iași" project in 2020, which was financed by the Iași City Hall. The idea of the project was to provide consumers in Iasi with a digital platform to facilitate access to food products directly from local producers [1]. Through the "GustDeIași.ro" digital platform, the aim was to make consumers aware of the importance of short supply chains, as well as to support local producers to capitalize on their products.

In 2020, at the level of the Podișul Mediașului LAG territory, to associate producers to sell local products, the agricultural cooperative "Food from Proximity" was established [12]. To facilitate the cooperation between farmers in the territory of the Mediaș Plateau LAG to commercialize local products through short food chains and the superior valorization of agricultural production, the "Food from Proximity" cooperative implemented the "Goods from the Mediaș Plateau" project. The products are delivered free of charge in an area of 60 km from Mediaș, for a minimum basket of 100 lei.

"The farm near you" is a short supply chain of horticultural products, mainly fruit (strawberries, cherries, blueberries,

raspberries), promoted by the Romcâpșuni Association in the online environment and is mainly addressed to consumers who want to know where they come from the fruits they consume [34]. The fruit production is obtained from farms in Giurgiu and Dâmbovița counties, and the customers are mainly from Bucharest and Ilfov so that from the time of picking to the time they reach the consumer does not exceed 24 hours. For customers who prefer online ordering, it can be picked up from 3 fixed refrigerated delivery points, and consumers come and pick them up from there, or by paying a fee of 25 lei, they can receive the fruit at home by courier.

In Bihor county, in Lelești commune, there is the family farm "Goat with three goats" whose main activity is the production of goat's milk cheeses [29]. Considering the main objective of the farm to promote quality and less quantity, its manager believes that direct sales to stable customers through short-chain trade is the most effective solution: "I go with the basket to the customers' house, I get in contact with them, I understand their demands and needs and adapt my offer according to their requirements".

The "Agroecologia" association launched in Cluj-Napoca the "Peasant's Basket" Program. This is a system of distribution of organic and traditional products directly to consumers' homes, on a subscription basis [29]. The producers who joined the project come from the counties of Cluj, Sălaj, Maramureș and Bihor, and the offer of certified organic or traditional products includes fruits and fruit juices, vegetables, sea buckthorn, homemade jam, bellows cheese, sausages, bacon, drumsticks.

"ROMO: from Producer directly to Consumer", a social entrepreneurship project, whose mission is to connect as many local producers as possible with as many consumers as possible. ROMO is an online trading system, based on Facebook, and the ROMO Brașov group is the first group of this type in Romania [37]. According to the two entrepreneurs who laid the foundations of the ROMO project: "our broader vision is to contribute to food security in our country and

to the generation of well-being by activating resources at the local level".

Launched in 2021, the startup Green Food is a marketplace through which local vegetables and fruits are sold and which comes with a logistics, and technological solution based on a short supply chain model. Green Food coordinates the supply chain from farm to city, and products are sourced from local or regional neighbourhoods [33]. According to the founder of Green Food: "on the local market, we have the first mover advantage as a supply and trading platform for local vegetables and fruits. We focus on the entire fresh supply chain. We are not just an online platform for ordering products. We offer solutions for decentralized inventory management, managing the commercial and logistical relationship between customers and producers, aggregating the offer and standardizing market information".

It is noted that the first models of short food supply chains in Romania appeared with the increase of the population's interest in a healthier diet, with the desire to understand the traceability of food products, all of which have positive effects on the sustainability of agricultural activities in small farms and the local economy.

Strategies to boost short food supply chains

Implementation of strategies that are adapted to local conditions and existing needs in the community can contribute to the development of these short distribution channels through a series of actions, such as [38]:

-Programs to support local producers: non-governmental organizations can initiate programs to encourage the purchase of food from local producers. This may include facilitating access to markets or promoting local products in local shops and restaurants.

-Consumer education and awareness campaigns: awareness of the benefits of short supply chains and the positive impact on local communities can stimulate demand for local products.

-Supporting local infrastructure through local markets and fairs: developing and promoting local markets and agricultural fairs can provide producers with a platform to sell directly to consumers.

-Public-private partnerships: policies and programs can be developed at the government level to encourage short supply chains, including subsidies or facilities for local producers.

-Online platforms: the existence of a digital platform offers the possibility of access to local products and simplifies the sales process between producers and consumers.

-Certification and labelling: the certification or labelling of locally produced agri-food products, and the implementation of the traceability system, can increase consumer confidence and support the development of this type of commercialization through short capitalization channels.

-Training and consulting programs for manufacturers: the participation of producers in various training programs can result in the efficiency of production processes and the increase of the quality of the obtained products.

-Collaboration between communities: collaboration between producers and consumers can facilitate the exchange of knowledge, and experience, and increase the skills of producers for certain activities.

CONCLUSIONS

The future of short food supply chains could be promising as they can play an increasingly important role in shaping food systems based on clear directions and relevant trends:

-Policy and legislative support: government policies and initiatives that promote and support short chains can contribute to their development and expansion. Agricultural subsidies, European support programs for local agriculture and regulations that facilitate direct sales from producers to consumers can be important tools in promoting short chains.

-Technology integration: the existence of mobile applications for online ordering can support accessibility in accessing and managing short supply chains.

-Innovation and diversification: innovation in products, processes and business models can help diversify and adapt short chains to the ever-changing needs and preferences of consumers. Initiatives such as urban farms

and cooperative purchasing systems can expand the scope of short chains and bring additional benefits to communities.

-Increasing cooperation and partnerships: cooperation between producers, consumers, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders can stimulate the development and diversification of short chains. Partnerships between farms, distribution networks and local institutions can strengthen supply chains and increase their positive impact on communities.

-Increasing focus on sustainability: a growing concern for environmental impact and food sustainability may lead to increased demand for products and practices promoted by short supply chains.

Consumers' option for short food supply chains becomes an alternative once they become more interested in healthier products and thus are oriented towards local products.

In conclusion, short food supply chains will be more valued by consumers and will occupy an increasingly important place in local food systems as their popularity and awareness among consumers increase.

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