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Abbreviations

AFN	Alternative Food Networks
CAP	Common Agriculture Policy
CSA	Community-supported agriculture
FM	Farmer Market
GHG	Greenhouse gas
OFN	Open Food Network
SFSC	Short food supply chains

Local food markets

At the turn of the twenty-first century, food safety scandals and concerns emerged, prompting consumers to prioritize healthier and more sustainable food options. This shift has brought short food supply chains (SFSCs) and alternative food networks (AFNs) into the spotlight. In recent years, SFSCs have rapidly evolved and become a focal point of scientific and political discourse. Furthermore, the rise of modern supply chains has diminished the connections and communication between consumers and producers, resulting in increased information asymmetry and a decline in consumer trust. Localized, shorter, and more economically (higher prices for producers), socially (direct interactions between producers and consumers), and environmentally (reduced transportation distances) sustainable supply chains present potential solutions to these challenges, positioning SFSCs as viable alternatives to global supply chains. The support of consumers and policymakers is crucial for the success of these initiatives. Both the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the United States' Farm Bill promote the proliferation of short supply chains. Various forms of SFSCs exist, including farmers' markets (FMs), community-supported agriculture (CSA), box schemes, farm shops, farm-based butchers, cooperatives, and other initiatives. While the diversity of SFSCs is acknowledged, FMs represent the most prevalent and popular type of SFSC today. FMs have historically served as a traditional method of food retailing and remain a significant sales channel in certain regions, particularly in developing and Mediterranean European countries. In contrast, traditional FMs have largely vanished in Anglocentric nations (the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) due to the rise of supermarkets. Nevertheless, modern FMs began to emerge in the 1970s, marking the resurgence of a new generation of farmers' markets.

Socio-economic and environmental impact of local food market

The engagement in FMs presents a multitude of benefits for both producers and consumers involved, serving as a potential remedy for challenges related to social, economic, and occasionally environmental sustainability [1, 2].

Consumers benefit from access to predominantly fresh, high-quality, and healthy local products at competitive prices, often perceived as lower, while enjoying the unique atmosphere and experience that FMs offer. Contrary to the common belief that prices at FMs are low, many consumers are willing to pay a premium for local goods. Furthermore, the transparency and trust established through these markets are highly valued, allowing customers to forge deeper connections and providing a communal space for friends and neighbours. FMs may also help consumers learn more about local products, production methods, and sustainable growing practices.

2.1 Social impact

Socially, FMs can help to rebuild connections within rural and urban areas while also promoting health benefits, such as improved access to fresh fruits and vegetables in larger communities. Farmers gain the opportunity to better understand their consumers and fellow producers, fostering the exchange of experiences, particularly in marketing and business practices [2].

By contributing to a healthy society through their work, individuals experience a sense of recognition, which subsequently enhances their own well-being.

There are primarily two significant methods by which FMs can enhance farmers' sense of acknowledgment. The first method involves traceability, which refers to the capacity to ascertain the origins and production processes of a product. This aspect is fundamental to FMs, as it allows consumers to appreciate the contributions of

farmers and various stakeholders throughout the supply chain, including those who are often overlooked, such as women. Consequently, traceability empowers consumers to make educated decisions regarding their food, thus facilitating their active involvement in the development of inclusive food systems. Secondly, consumers might exhibit heightened interest in the production methods and limitations associated with food purchases in farmers' markets. This growing curiosity regarding agri-food systems could lead to broader behavioural shifts, such as a desire to share skills and participate in civic engagement. Recognizing such changes may enhance farmers' sense of value regarding their social contributions. Nevertheless, when Local Food Systems (LFS) lack direct interaction between producers and consumers, it restricts the opportunities for re-establishing connections, as mutual acknowledgment relies on both psychological and physical engagements.

2.2 Economic impact

FMs facilitate direct sales from vendors to consumers, often providing a lucrative alternative to the lower prices found in commodity markets, such as supermarkets, which are linked to industrial agriculture. The financial resources retained within the local economy can support local wages, the acquisition of regional products, and overall economic development. Additionally, FMs frequently contribute to increased employment and local tax revenues.

Furthermore, consumers are willing to pay premium for local over non-local food products.

There are three primary factors that may elucidate how farmers can achieve economic benefits from selling in farmers' markets at an individual level. Firstly, although the ultimate value of a product is typically established through the collaborative contributions of various participants within the supply chain, the allocation of the value-added among these participants is influenced by the internal governance framework and the dynamics of bargaining power. In accordance with principal-agent theory, agents, or participants in the supply chain, can enhance their bargaining power by minimizing their reliance on others. In farmers' markets, farmers can accomplish this in two distinct manners. One approach is through direct sales to

consumers, which may result in a price premium compared to longer supply chains, as farmers have the autonomy to determine their own prices. The second approach involves the integration of multiple distribution channels, including those associated with niche markets for specialty products (e.g., local branding). This strategy also serves as a means of diversification, thereby mitigating the economic risks linked to reliance on a singular distribution channel. Secondly, transaction cost theory posits that every selling arrangement incurs coordination costs related to the decision-making, planning, and negotiation processes involved in the sale. While transaction costs are likely to be particularly elevated in direct channels due to the numerous individual transactions necessitated, they may be comparatively lower in traditional local channels owing to economies of scale. Furthermore, the existing literature on firm capabilities and learning indicates that cultivating the ability to effectively participate in specific supply chain activities can be quite challenging and time-intensive. For farmers engaged in Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC), the internalization of processing and marketing functions may consequently lead to increased expenses associated with skill development and additional labor needs.

2.3 Environmental impact

Due to the nature of local sales, food typically does not travel long distances, resulting in fewer food miles compared to the logistics employed by supermarkets. Moreover, there are claims of reduced packaging waste and fertilizer usage, as well as a decrease in food waste.

Food miles, defined as the distance food travels from producer to consumer, are posited to play a role in alleviating climate change. It is reasonable to infer that minimizing food miles could lead to a reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions linked to food transportation, thereby lessening the overall effects on climate change [1].

Farmers who directly interact with consumers upon their request are often encouraged to diversify their production in terms of the number of crop varieties grown.

Alternative Food Networks are advocating for agro-ecological methods, which encompass polyculture practices and the growing of traditional fruit and vegetable varieties.

Organic farmers tend to sell a greater portion of their produce through SFSC compared to their non-certified counterparts. Conversely, those who engage in SFSC are more likely to possess organic certification. These findings may suggest variations among countries regarding the relationship between SFSC and organic agriculture.

Furthermore, often there is a high associated biodiversity maintained around diverse farms participating in SFSC.

Consumer attitude

Food quality, pricing, and the market environment, particularly social interactions, serve as the main draws of FMs. Customers who prioritize these aspects typically exhibit distinct socio-demographic traits. Consumers attend farmers' markets to purchase fresh produce. Research indicates that women frequent FMs more than men, likely due to their role as the primary food buyers in many households. Although there is considerable variation in customer age across different countries and continents, the average FM patron is generally between the ages of 35 and 55. Furthermore, individuals who show an interest in FMs tend to possess higher educational qualifications than the general population, a trend that is prevalent across various short food supply chains (SFSCs). Analysing the income levels of FM customers presents significant challenges, yet it remains a common topic in academic discussions. Most research suggests that FM consumers predominantly belong to the middle or upper-middle class [1, 2].

The attributes of consumers that notably enhance the likelihood of attending a farmers' market specifically for the purpose of acquiring produce include the frequency of visits, educational attainment, health or dietary concerns, passion for agriculture, income exceeding the average of the sample, being the primary shopper,



readiness to participate in a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, engagement in home gardening, and the demographic of married women.



Connecting Fields to Forks - The Vital Role of Local Markets

Across the diverse agricultural landscapes of Europe, farmers work tirelessly to cultivate the food that sustains communities. While large-scale agriculture often dominates headlines, a significant portion of Europe's food production comes from smaller farms. In fact, over three-quarters of farms within the European Union operate on less than 10 hectares. These smaller agricultural holdings are not just picturesque elements of the rural scenery; they are vital contributors to food security, regional economies, and the preservation of traditional farming practices. However, these farmers often face significant challenges in bringing their produce to consumers, particularly when navigating complex, lengthy supply chains dominated by large distributors and retailers. Connecting directly with local markets offers a crucial pathway for these farmers to achieve fair prices, build sustainable businesses, and strengthen their connection with the communities they feed.

4.1 Challenges in Traditional Supply Chains

The journey from farm to table can be long and convoluted in conventional food systems. Produce often travels vast distances, passing through multiple intermediaries – processors, packers, wholesalers, and retailers – before reaching the consumer. While efficient in some respects, this model frequently disadvantages the primary producer. Farmers may receive only a small fraction of the final price paid by the consumer, squeezed by the negotiating power of larger players in the chain. Furthermore, long supply chains can lead to reduced freshness, loss of traceability,



and a disconnect between consumers and the origins of their food. The economic pressures, coupled with difficulties in accessing land and the increasing impacts of climate change, have unfortunately led to the decline of many small farms across Europe in recent decades, highlighting the urgent need for alternative, more direct routes to market.

4.2 The Rise of Local Food Systems

In response to these challenges, and driven by growing consumer interest in food provenance, quality, and sustainability, local food systems are experiencing a resurgence across Europe. Consumers are increasingly seeking out fresh, seasonal produce with a clear origin story, valuing the connection to local farmers and the reduced environmental impact often associated with shorter supply chains. This shift is further supported by policy initiatives, such as the EU's Farm to Fork strategy, which explicitly aims to redesign food systems to ensure fair economic returns for primary producers and promote sustainable food production. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical instability have also underscored the importance of resilient, localized food supplies, further boosting interest in strengthening connections between local farmers and consumers.

Pathways to the Local Market

Fortunately, European farmers have a growing number of avenues to access local markets and sell their products more directly. These approaches vary in scale and method, offering options to suit different types of farms and products. Traditional methods like selling at physical farmers' markets remain popular, providing direct interaction with customers. Direct sales from the farm gate or through farm shops offer another personal connection. Increasingly, farmers are collaborating through local food associations or cooperatives, pooling resources for marketing, distribution, or even processing. Public procurement, where institutions like schools and hospitals source food locally, presents a significant opportunity. Furthermore, the digital age has opened up new possibilities through online platforms and digital tools, enabling farmers to reach local customers efficiently. These platforms range from individual online shops to collaborative virtual farmers' markets.

5.1 Exploring the Options

This section aims to guide European short food chain actors through the various options for accessing local markets. The actors in the short food chain are farmers, local shops, small distributors. This first section introduces the importance and context of local food systems. The subsequent sections will delve deeper into specific strategies and tools available. Section 2 will explore the landscape of digital platforms and other innovative tools, including detailed examples like the Open Food Network and The Food Assembly (La Ruche qui dit Oui!), explaining how they function and the benefits they offer. Section 3 will provide practical examples of how farmers can implement various local selling strategies. By understanding the available pathways, farmers can identify the strategies that best fit their business goals and contribute to building a more resilient, fair, and sustainable food future for Europe.



Digital Fields - Platforms and Tools for Local Market Access

Leveraging Technology for Direct Sales

The digital revolution has profoundly impacted how we connect, communicate, and conduct business, and the agricultural sector is no exception. For European farmers seeking to tap into local markets, a growing array of digital platforms and tools offer powerful ways to bypass traditional intermediaries, connect directly with consumers, manage sales efficiently, and build resilient businesses. These technologies range from comprehensive online marketplace software to simpler communication tools, each providing unique advantages for reaching local customers and streamlining operations. While traditional methods like farmers' markets and farm gate sales retain their importance, digital tools can significantly amplify a farmer's reach and efficiency, making local sales a more viable and profitable option.

Online Marketplaces and Food Hub Platforms

One of the most significant developments is the emergence of dedicated online platforms designed specifically for local food systems. These platforms act as virtual marketplaces, enabling farmers to list their products, manage orders, and coordinate distribution, often collectively with other local producers. Two prominent examples operating across Europe are the Open Food Network and The Food Assembly (La Ruche qui dit Oui!).

Open Food Network (OFN)

The Open Food Network operates as a global, non-profit, open-source project with a strong presence in several European countries (UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, etc.). Its core mission is to build a fairer, more local, and transparent food system by providing the necessary digital infrastructure.

- **How it Works for Farmers:** OFN provides flexible software allowing farmers to create their own online shopfront or join/create a local 'food hub' (a virtual market managed by a community group or wholesaler). Farmers list products, set prices, and manage stock. The software handles food-specific complexities (variable weights, units).



- Key Features: Direct sales management, online payment collection (Stripe, PayPal, bank transfer, cash), delivery/collection options (time slots, locations), order cycle management. Farmers can also supply other hubs on the network.
- Benefits: Farmer control over pricing/sales, open-source/non-profit ethos, collaboration, scalability (individual shop or hub participation).

The Food Assembly (La Ruche qui dit Oui!)

Originating in France, this platform blends online ordering with physical collection points ('Assemblies').

- How it Works for Farmers: Farmers list products for a specific local Assembly. Customers order online during a sales window. Farmers deliver pre-ordered goods to the Assembly point for customer collection at a weekly pop-up market.
- Key Features: Online ordering, payment processing, product listing tools. Each Assembly is run by a local 'Host' managing venue, customers, and producers.
- Benefits: Guaranteed sales (pre-ordered), waste elimination, farmer-set prices (approx. 80% return ex-VAT in French model), face-to-face customer interaction, simplified accounting/payments.

Other Digital Approaches

Beyond these platforms, other tools support local sales:

- REKO Rings: Popular in Nordic countries, operating via closed Facebook groups. Producers post, customers order via comments, meet for quick handover at a set time/place. Low-cost, direct, pre-order model.
- Specialized E-commerce Platforms: Commercial platforms tailored for farm sales (e.g., Local Line, Barn2Door - availability varies). Offer inventory management, CRM, logistics features (often subscription-based).
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Software: Platforms to manage CSA subscriptions, payments, and communication.

- Direct Online Shops: Standalone websites using general platforms (Shopify, WooCommerce, Squarespace). Require more setup, lack food-specific network effects.
- Social Media & Messaging Apps: Facebook pages, Instagram shops, WhatsApp groups for direct marketing, announcing availability, taking orders (suited for smaller scale/tight-knit communities).

5.2 Choosing the Right Tools

The best digital approach depends on the farmer's needs, scale, technical comfort, and business model. Consider control level, target customers, admin time, budget, and collaboration interest. OFN offers flexibility/open-source ethos; The Food Assembly provides a structured community/ guaranteed sale; REKO offers simplicity; specialized platforms offer advanced features. Exploring these options helps farmers effectively reach local consumers, gain fairer returns, and contribute to a sustainable food system.

Practical Pathways - Examples of Selling Locally

Understanding the concepts and platforms is the first step; putting them into practice is the next. Selling locally involves choosing the right methods for the short food chain actors, products, and target customers. Here are practical examples and considerations for various local selling strategies popular across Europe:

a. Excelling at the Farmers' Market

Farmers' markets are a cornerstone of local food systems, offering direct customer interaction.

- Preparation: Identify suitable markets in your area (check frequency, opening times, stall fees, typical customer base). Apply for a stall, ensuring you meet any local regulations or market rules (e.g., regarding product origin, insurance).
- Presentation: Create an attractive stall. Use clean tablecloths, clear signage with your farm name and location, and display produce appealingly (e.g., in baskets, crates). Consider offering samples if permitted.



- Pricing: Research prices at the market but price based on your costs and desired margin. Use clear price labels. Offer deals for bulk purchases or end-of-day sales to minimize waste.
- Engagement: Be friendly and knowledgeable. Talk to customers about your farm, how produce is grown, and offer cooking suggestions. Build relationships – regular customers are valuable.
- Logistics: Plan transport, setup/takedown time. Bring appropriate change, consider a card payment reader (like SumUp or Zettle) for convenience.

b. Setting Up Farm Gate Sales or a Farm Shop

Selling directly from your farm creates a strong connection.

- Setup: Designate a clear area. If unmanned (honesty box), ensure its secure and weatherproof. For a staffed shop, make it welcome. Clear signage from the road is crucial.
- Product Range: Offer your core products. Consider adding value-added items (jams, juices) or complementary products from neighbouring farms (with agreement).
- Operations: Decide on opening hours. For honesty boxes, have clear instructions and a secure payment box. For staffed shops, ensure someone is available. Keep the area tidy and well-stocked.
- Payment: Honesty boxes rely on cash. Staffed shops should offer cash and card payments.

c. Implementing a Box Scheme / CSA Model

These models provide predictable income and build customer loyalty.

- Model Design: Decide on box size(s), frequency (weekly/bi-weekly), price, and contents (farmer's choice or some customization). Define the season length.
- Recruitment: Market your scheme locally – flyers, social media, local events, website. Clearly explain the CSA concept (shared risk/reward).

- Logistics: Plan harvest schedules to meet box needs. Establish packing routines. Decide on distribution – farm collection points, local drop-off points, or home delivery (consider costs/routes).
- Communication: Regularly communicate with members (email newsletters are common) about what's in the box, farm news, recipes. Manage subscriptions and payments (online platforms can help).

d. Supplying Local Businesses (Restaurants, Retailers)

Selling wholesale locally can provide larger, regular orders.

- Identify Prospects: Look for independent restaurants, cafes, pubs, greengrocers, or farm shops in your area that value local sourcing.
- Build Relationships: Approach chefs or owners directly. Bring samples. Understand their needs (quantity, frequency, specific products). Reliability is key.
- Pricing & Invoicing: Agree on wholesale prices. Establish clear invoicing and payment terms.
- Delivery: Plan regular delivery routes and schedules. Ensure produce arrives fresh and well-presented.

e. Leveraging Online Platforms Effectively

Using platforms like Open Food Network (OFN) or The Food Assembly requires active management.

- Listing Products: Take good photos. Write clear descriptions. Keep stock levels updated accurately.
- Managing Orders (OFN/Similar): Check for new orders regularly. Prepare orders for collection/delivery according to the schedule set by you or the hub.
- Coordinating Collections (Food Assembly/REKO): Prepare only what's ordered. Arrive at the collection point on time. Engage with customers during the handover.

- Communication: Respond promptly to customer queries via the platform or other agreed channels.

f. Collaborative Selling Ventures

Partnering with other local producers can increase efficiency and reach.

- Joint Market Stalls: Share stall costs and staffing at farmers' markets, offering a wider range of products to attract more customers.
- Shared Delivery Routes: Coordinate deliveries with nearby farms to reduce transport costs and time, especially for box schemes or business supplies.
- Combined Online Shops/Hubs: Use platforms like OFN to create a multi-producer hub, sharing administrative tasks and marketing efforts.
- Choosing Your Path: The most effective strategy often involves a combination of these methods. Start with what feels manageable, learn from experience, talk to other local farmers, and adapt your approach based on customer feedback and your farm's capacity.

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