

# Consumer Innovation in Urban and Peri-urban Agriculture in the Mediterranean region

White Paper



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# White Paper

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# 1. Introduction

New forms of retailing are arising with the objective of **making peri-urban food available at daily basis and affordable prices and establishing direct links with metropolitan farmers**. Consumers' associations are also very active to create pressure groups and frequently develop successful collaborations with local public authorities to gain access to allotments for community gardens and keep green areas free from urbanisation, among others. These actions can be understood as a form of 'consumer-citizenship', which is the main focus of this document.

This report has been prepared in the context of **MADRE, a capitalization Interreg Med project that addresses urban and peri-urban agriculture in 6 metropolitan areas** (Barcelona, Montpellier, Marseille, Bologna, Tirana and Thessaloniki) with the objective of sharing good practices and creating a Mediterranean network of cooperation. Building on local participatory diagnoses, a series of transnational meetings were held in order to discuss different aspects of this issue. This report is one of the 6 'white papers' deriving from these meetings. In particular, **consumer innovation was addressed at a Workshop held in Tirana the 22 and 23 of March 2018 with the participation of about 60 participants** from different stakeholder groups of the 6 metropolitan areas: farmers and business sphere (16%), academia and research (37%), civil society (30%) and public authorities (17%). The case studies presented in this document are included in the 'Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture Best Practice Catalogue', a collection of 36 key initiatives from the 6 MADRE metropolitan areas. The analysis presented here also complements a more succinct policy recommendations report. All these documents can be accessed through MADRE's website.

The review of the topic and recommendations that follow aim to address all Mediterranean metropolises. As they emerge to a great extent from the discussions held in the context of the project's participatory meetings, their relevance and comprehensiveness might be somehow limited by the diversity, expertise and geographic scope of participants. Nevertheless, they pursue a regional dimension of the issue.

The report consists of a general description of consumer innovation in the context of urban and peri-urban agriculture, after which the main discussions from the project are presented. The last section presents succinct recommendations both for civil society and policy-makers on how to further develop this issue.

## 2. What is consumer innovation in metropolitan agriculture?

Consumer innovation refers to new practices developed by individual end-users or user communities, as opposed to those from producers, suppliers or public authorities. In the food sector, many groups in civil society are undertaking actions to **develop innovative forms of retailing with the aim of gaining access to fresh, local, sustainable food products**. These new practices respond to consumer **demands for shorter marketing channels and the creation of direct links with local farmers and processors**.

Consumers' active participation in the development of urban agriculture creates new forms of interaction between the dynamics of metropolitan agriculture and the transformation of lifestyles and consumption patterns. The idea behind is the **cultivation of healthy relationships between people and food**. This approach plays an important role in re-balancing tradition and modern food habits, bringing them together in a way that promotes healthy and environmentally sustainable food consumption, supporting the right to adequate food. Consumer innovation can also raise awareness of children and youth on healthy and sustainable food, especially in schools and educational activities. In fact, most consumer innovations go far beyond food supply, since they usually represent educational or political platforms where citizens undertake a wide variety of actions related with the food system.

Good examples of consumer innovation are consumer cooperatives, solidarity purchase groups, community supported agriculture and any other types of configuration regarding little presence of intermediaries and close links between producers and consumers. Certain large-scale initiatives can also enter this scope, like the case of cooperative supermarkets ('food coops'), farmer-consumer shops or different types of open public spaces aimed at making local products available for consumers.



### 3. How to foster consumer innovation: lessons and challenges

Consumer innovation on metropolitan agriculture is flourishing all across Europe. In the context of MADRE, a participatory analysis with local stakeholders from the metropolitan areas of Thessaloniki, Tirana, Bologna, Marseille, Montpellier and Barcelona highlighted a number of elements that hamper and foster such research initiatives. The following table presents the **most relevant common factors from each local analysis**, which can be adopted as a first approach to the situation of this issue in the Mediterranean area.

#### + Strengths and opportunities

- Growing social interest and awareness creates a **demand for local, sustainable and traceable products**.
- The **expansion of social organisations and cooperatives** that question traditional production systems and educating on the possibilities to create alternative forms of consumption, cooperation and production.
- **Increasing political willingness** to commit to changes towards sustainable practices, both in production and consumption.
- Existence of many **social initiatives**, especially at schools, **that focus on educating about sustainability practices and values**.

#### - Weaknesses and risks

- The **competition of large-scale distribution channels** (supermarkets), especially in terms of low prices for agricultural products.
- Existence of severe **imbalance between food production at a regional level, consumption and exports**.
- Lack of certifications and **labels to mark short-cycle products and environmental-friendly practices** in a local context.
- Need for **additional logistics facilities** in order to facilitate the development of alternative distribution systems.

The combination of these factors opens up a number of issues that are highly relevant in any effort to support and enhance projects of consumer innovation in urban and peri-urban agriculture. In order to further develop these strengths and weaknesses, representatives from the MADRE metropolises developed a transnational analysis which led to more in-depth discussions around 4 main topics: raising consumer perception and awareness (3.1), boosting short food supply chains (3.2), assuring safety and traceability of urban and peri-urban food products (3.3) and enhancing collective catering and public procurement (3.4).

#### 3.1 Raising consumer perception and citizen awareness

One of the main elements regarding consumer innovation is civil society's perception of the current situation of metropolitan agriculture and local food systems. Seeing the extent to which citizenship awareness is risen in terms of their knowledge of the local food system and the ability to influence all the food chain through the very act of consumption itself is key for developing innovations in this area. This **level of political and environmental perception of the food system** and the perspective of the direct relation between the act of consumption and environmental protection, social justice, local economy, among others, is seen as one of the main drivers for the creation of consumer based initiatives.

In this sense, clear and reliable information is one of the most important aspects in order to engage consumer awareness properly. This information is often difficult to find due to the abundance of confusing labels and commercial advertisements present in the conventional distribution system, which often have a strong influence over consumers and its perception of reality. It is not uncommon, for instance, to find people thinking that proximity guarantees safety, when local and healthy food are not always equivalent. Or also, consumers buying organic products grown at a far distance thinking it is very convenient for the environment while there is a local alternative which might be more beneficial in these terms. Overall, there is a need to **provide a clear and reliable framework of information to civil society** regarding the products that are available on the market and which is its impact on health, society and the whole local food system.

On the other hand, there is also a critical need to provide information about the nature and characteristics of local food systems inside cities and its surrounding areas. In other words, it is important to **disseminate knowledge on the local context of urban and peri-urban agriculture**: which kind of food is produced, to which extent consumers can rely on local production in terms of health, which are the most convenient products to buy in each season, the need to create short supply chains, etc. It is necessary to enrich and complement the understanding of metropolitan agriculture, which is often regarded only as a space for leisure and entertainment without considering its potential to provide fresh products. There is a need to stress, too, its capabilities to generate social cooperation and network around food, create short distribution channels and direct relations between consumers and producers, create job opportunities and, as a result, improve social and environmental sustainability of cities.

There are different ways to engage consumer perception, like awareness and information campaigns, educational activities on schools, public procurement with a communication strategies, etc. One quite innovative way to deal with it

are Collaborative Awareness Platforms, which are models to create awareness of emerging sustainability challenges and the role that each person can play to ease them through collective action (see example 1). Usually in the form of online platforms, these initiatives foster collaborative solutions based on networks, enabling new forms of digital social innovation.

### Example 1 Open Food Facts

Open Food Facts is a Collaborative Awareness Platform based on a database of food products with ingredients, allergens, nutrition facts and all the tidbits of information available on product labels. It is a non-profit association of volunteers, with over 1,800 contributors who have added more than 75,000 products from 150 countries using a mobile phone app to scan barcodes and upload pictures of products and their labels. The complete database is published as open data and can be reused by anyone. The search form in the web includes dozens of criteria so consumers can find products that match their criteria and see the nutritional evaluation of each product.

More info in: [<https://world.openfoodfacts.org/>]

## 3.2 Boosting short food supply chains

Localizing food systems is one of the top priorities in order to create sustainable links between producers and consumers. The creation of **alternative configurations of production, distribution and consumption** becomes crucial for improving the sharing of its added value, avoiding high power structures and intermediaries through economically and socially fair relations. This broad range of configurations regarding short distances (proximity) and/or few intermediaries between producers and consumers are mainly referred as **short food supply chains**.

There are several existing models of short food supply chains with different characteristics, such as farmers' markets, farm shops, collective farmers' shops, community-supported agriculture and solidarity purchase groups, among others. Short supply chains have proven to be very successful in order to **improve farmers' income and reduce its workload while advancing towards more sustainable practices in the field**. Consequently, there has been an emergence of specific models of farms centred on the use of this kind of alternative configurations which manage to ensure sustainable or shared management of their risk, such as Community Supported Agriculture (see examples 2 and 3).

### Example 2 URGENCI

URGENCI is an International Network for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) based in Marseille, France, aimed to promote all forms of partnership between producers and local consumers, especially CSA, as a solution to the problems associated with global intensive agricultural production and distribution. CSA represents a relevant locus for triggering civic responsibility in economic relations and for setting up a social network of solidarity between farmers and consumers, building more socially fair and sustainable communities trading on fair terms both with neighbours and with people in distant regions. It is based on several principles that are differential from other alternative supply chains, like mutual assistance, accepting the produce, mutual concession on the price decision, democratic management or maintaining the appropriate group scale, among others.

More info on MADRE online catalogue (link in the last page)

### Example 3 Arvaia (Bologna, Italy)

In 2013, Arvaia gave new momentum to the concept with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in Italy. Through the cooperative, citizen-consumers support organic and biodynamic agriculture and take back rural education and culture in the urban context. Arvaia's main activities are the distribution of organic products in the city of Bologna, the cultivation of 45 different types of vegetables, as well as the organisation of educational activities and public events. Arvaia also develops collaborations with thematic networks and academic institutions to design and experiment solutions for organic farming and short-circuit food distribution.

More info on MADRE online catalogue (link in the last page)

In the present context where local and organic food is increasing in popularity, there is an important concern regarding the scalability of these alternative networks, that is, the capability of each model to handle a growing demand, or its potential to be enlarged to accommodate that growth. In this sense, there is no clear consensus on which kind of structures and organisational models are more convenient in order to **answer to this much broader social interest**, especially regarding the discussion about the amount of necessary intermediaries and the specific characteristics of the consumer-producer relation. Systems with strict direct relations and fewer intermediaries (community-supported agriculture, farmer's markets, etc.) are quite extended in some European cities and have been very effective, but there are some doubts regarding their capabilities to grow, especially in large cities, since it seems they have reached limits on certain amount of consumers. This is mostly due to a bottleneck in terms of logistics, but also because these models require time efforts and political convictions from both producers and consumers which not every city dweller is willing to reach. With this in mind, other models have been emerging in order to make local and organic food available, such as cooperative supermarkets or 'food coops', which are prepared and designed to attend a wider public (see example 4). Although the capability of these systems to escalate are much bigger than other models, their prioritisation of social

inclusiveness and growth over some political principles has led to some discussions on whether or not it is the most convenient model for the promotion of local food systems.

#### Example 4

##### La Louve (Paris, France)

La Louve is a non-profit cooperative supermarket (food coop) based in Paris where members are at the same time owners, decision-makers and costumers. Decisions on the orientations of the store are collective and any member has the same voice regardless of its number of shares, and all profits are reinvested in the project. This model of self-management reduces the cost of running the supermarket and margins are lower than in most other food stores so they are able to offer very low prices for a wide range of products compared with conventional distribution. La Louve is committed to making the cooperative accessible to all by meeting the needs and food choices of its members. It also aims to make its participants aware for current food issues and wishes to become a place for exchange and sharing.

More info in: <https://cooplalouve.fr/>

Taking into account this diversity of models, it is important to **study and monitor the flow of local produce through the various alternative distribution channels** in order to gain better understanding of what is better in each particular context. This analysis should pay special attention to the potential for breaking current power structures, create socially and environmentally sustainable relations and improve farmers' income while being capable of supplying high density cities. In this framework, local public authorities should act as facilitators to engage this debate, make easier administrative procedures and open spaces so that this kind of models, if fostered by producers and consumers, can keep on growing and replicating.

Finally, it is important to remark that marketing systems for urban livestock, aquaculture and urban agriculture are very little developed and studies. In contrast to the available literature on food marketing from rural areas and even peri-urban production, these other forms of farming need to be better analysed and supported by public policies in order to seize their potential contribution to local food systems.

### 3.3 Assuring safety and traceability of urban and peri-urban food products

Urban and peri-urban agricultural products face challenges of safety and traceability, just as the rest of agricultural products. Nevertheless, products commercialized in short supply chains often rely on **alternative certification systems**, mainly because: a) conventional labels are very expensive for small farmers, sometimes to the extent to become unaffordable; b) being part of a large certification scheme makes it more difficult to highlight the added value of local and urban farming; and c) the lack of specific labels for urban and peri-urban agriculture and its singularities.

On the other hand, consumers are often overwhelmed by the number of labels placed in a product, which often rely on a strong commercial basis rather than safety and traceability issues. The added value of urban and peri-urban farming is not represented accordingly and, as stated before, local products are difficult to integrate in traditional certification processes. For all these reasons, consumers and producers have developed different mechanisms for product identification, such as **informal agreements** based on mutual trust, which can be more convenient for their way of functioning.

In consequence, there is a need to **design innovative mechanisms (or formalize existing ones) that allow urban farming products to be certified in a way that is affordable for farmers and reliable for consumers**. Avoiding external intermediaries (certification companies) and relying on local direct partnerships between consumers and producers is a great way to reduce costs for farmers and build trust links. Many urban farming activities already work with some of these alternative scheme, but there is a critical need to formalize these configurations, which means to regulate and legalize them, in order for them to be completely reliable for a wider range of consumers.

### 3.4 Enhancing collective catering and public procurement

Purchases made by the public sector deserve special attention, since they play a major role in the food market chain and can have a high influence on the productive sector. Cities, municipalities and countries are the main public authorities reporting procurement activities for the food sector, covering provision to schools, health and social care, higher education, government office canteens, sport and leisure arenas, defence services and prisons, among others. **Public procurement regulated under sustainable criteria** (also known as Green Public Procurement) **can play a significant role in localizing food systems of urban and peri-urban areas**. Besides that, it can help stimulate a critical mass of demand for more sustainable goods and services which otherwise would be difficult to get onto the market.

Many European cities have developed initiatives in this field (see example 5), but the challenge of making these systems common practices still remains. In this sense, neither public nor private catering seem to be fully prepared to rely on short food supply chains and local food mainly due to regulations addressing hygienic and other types of standards, which are usually designed for large distribution systems. Logistics, again, represents a big constraint for this kind of alternative configurations.

### Example 5 Menjadors Ecològics (Catalonia, Spain)

Menjadors Ecològics (Organic Dining Rooms) is a non-profit association created in 2013 as a response to a study conducted in the region of Catalonia which showed that only 40 out of its 2,800 schools had an organic canteen. The organisation has since worked for providing support and training to all the parties that are involved in the process of transforming school canteens into organic (cooks, parents, directive staff, children, etc.). That includes both public and private schools. Its members work in close relation with local farmers from the surroundings of each school, and after some years they succeeded in offering a wide range of training activities, such as workshops, talks and events.

More info on MADRE online catalogue ([link in the last page](#))

Overall, there is a need to **include clear and verifiable environmental criteria for products and services in the public procurement process** that help accelerate demand for local products and drive the market towards a more sustainable paradigm. This could result in a strong stimulus and encouragement for consumer or producer innovations and provide food producers with real incentives for developing sustainable practices. It is important to note that green public procurement has to be integrated in a wider territorial and policy strategy, mostly regarding the productive sector, since there is no sense in boosting the demand without assuring the corresponding food supply. Instead, public procurement should be a strong tool to further implement policies regarding the productive system, such as access to land.

Private initiatives (restaurants, bars, public events, etc.) are also large purchasers of food products and they should be encouraged to aim for short food supply chains. Again, the logistic bottleneck is one of the main limiting factors for these new distribution configurations, but public authorities can **contribute to support initiatives that follow sustainable criteria** and explore a range of innovative policies (see example 6).

### Example 6 Blerina Bombaj (Tirana, Albania)

Blerina Bombaj started her business activity as a dietician and restaurant owner in the centre of Tirana. She supported people in their everyday diet and created personalised food portions according to their needs. Her success led to a diversification of her business, which now includes farming, processing, cooking, selling, advising and facilitating farm entertainment activities. The whole of these activities are consistent with an agro-ecological vision. In addition to her main business, Blerina is also very active in social circles and media around Tirana, raising awareness about the importance of healthy food and using local products.

More info on MADRE online catalogue ([link in the last page](#))

## 4. Recommendations

Metropolitan agriculture has multiple dimensions and its development brings together a wide range of stakeholders. Innovative experiences from the consumers' perspective are some of the actions that can help to preserve and strengthen urban and peri-urban agriculture. The following recommendations aim at this objective, with a particular focus on the specific topics discussed in this report.

### Civil society, farmers and other private stakeholders:

- Use and enrich open data sources to access and disseminate information about business practices regarding their food production, packaging and distribution of products. Also, use them in order to share knowledge and raise awareness among producers and consumers.
- Create an effective communication plan right (if possible, at the very first stage of new projects) that allows an increasing visibility of the product and give information about its added value.

### Public authorities:

- Provide budget for broad awareness campaigns to educate citizens about the pressing need re-evaluate the business model of food production that fosters local and organic systems.
- Undertake action in educating consumers about the current food system with the goal to raise awareness and drive interest towards the demand for production and distribution alternatives.
- Give policy and financial support to short food supply chains, acting as facilitators for administrative procedures and opening public spaces so this kind of models can keep on growing and replicating.
- Implement country-wide policies that provide tax breaks for associations, cooperatives, and businesses working under sustainability criteria. Provide additional benefits for carrying out educational activities for improved nutrition and cooking practices.
- Implement green public procurement in the food sector. Include clear and verifiable environmental criteria for products and services in the public procurement process that help accelerate demand for local products and drive the market towards a more sustainable paradigm.

See the catalogue on-line at the following links:

[goo.gl/Qs2LFi](https://goo.gl/Qs2LFi)

[www.agri-madre.net](http://www.agri-madre.net)



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