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ENCLAVES OF ACTIVISM AND TASTE:  
CONSUMER COOPERATIVES IN POLAND AS ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS

DOI: 10.18030/SOCIO.HU.2015EN.145

ABSTRACT

Alternative Food Network (AFN) is a broad term encompassing many initiatives connected by the aim to build an alternative to globalized industrial food production and distribution. AFN is a term that covers many ways of connecting producers and consumers on the local level, e.g. community supported agriculture (CSA), farmer markets or food cooperatives. In this article, the authors analyse the newly established consumer cooperatives all over Poland, as a local form of alternative food network. The authors describe the specific character of this type of AFN, both from the consumers' and producers' point of view, and reflect on the issue of how specific social and historical background influence their development. The authors also discuss the "enclave" character of the cooperatives, that is suggested to be specific to the Polish type of AFN. The cooperatives studied varied considerably, so the authors propose two distinct types: activist and consumer-oriented. Polish food cooperatives possess characteristics that the authors have decided to label with a common term of "enclave" character.

**Keywords:** models of alternative food networks, consumer cooperatives, sustainable farming, social enclaves.

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INTRODUCTION

The term “alternative food networks” (AFNs) was coined in the beginning of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Renting et al. 2003, Goodman 2004, Marsden 2004). AFN is a broad term encompassing many initiatives of varying scale and character, connected by the aim to build an alternative to globalized industrial food production and distribution. AFNs are often conceptualized as a response to growing civil distress connected to social and environmental attributes of food (Murdoch–Miele 2004: 156). Some researchers suggest that alternative approaches to food should be regarded as a symptom of a new “postproductivist order” emerging in the West (Renting et al. 2003).

Alternative food networks are understood as attempts to respatialise and resocialise food production (Jarosz 2008). Food systems are re-localized and heterogeneity in food production and distribution is being re-established by fostering regional distinction and “reinventing traditions” connected to food (Hinrichs 2003: 34). AFN is a term that encompasses many ways of connecting producers and consumers at the local level, e.g. community supported agriculture (CSA), farmer markets or food cooperatives (see e.g. Hinrichs 2000, Jarosz 2008, Goodman, Goodman–Dupuis 2013).

One of the first attempts to organize consumer and producers in networks alternative to the market in Poland are consumer cooperatives (*kooperatywy spożywcze*) that have been emerging all over the country, especially in larger cities, during the last six years. There have been over 30 attempts to establish cooperatives all over Poland, however, not all of them succeeded and managed to survive a longer period. Despite the growing popularity of cooperatives, which gained interest of popular media, only about 15 function regularly after five years of the movement’s development. Interest in quality food, purchased directly from producers results also in a growing number of commercial initiatives like buying groups. The difference between a buying group and a cooperative is that being a member of food coop requires dedicating time and contributing to a common fund and a varying degree of democracy in decision making.

In this article, the authors analyse the newly established consumer cooperatives as a local form of alternative food network based on their own research. Their aim is to describe the specific character of this type of AFN, both from the consumers’ and producers’ point of view and reflect on the issue of how specific social and historical background influence their structure, relations to the food system and interaction with their social surroundings. In the following parts of the article, we will describe briefly the history of the emergence of cooperatives. The next section is devoted to describing cooperatives from the consumers’ and farmers’ point

of view. We will present the division of the cooperatives in two types – activist and consumption-oriented – and discuss their connection to different social milieus – radical intelligentsia and the new middle class. We will show the character of farms delivering to cooperatives, discuss the motivation of farmers to collaborate with this type of AFN, their social background and their role in their local communities. In this part, we will also discuss how the basic features attributed to the Western AFNs – such as food localness and food quality – are understood in the Polish context.

Finally, we will reflect on the specific feature that links both types of cooperatives – their “enclave” character that we claim to be specific to the Polish type of AFN. We will discuss how the Polish food system on the one side, and some characteristic of the Polish civil society on the other, can probably be linked to this special character of Polish alternative food networks.

## COOPERATIVES AS ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS

### Alternative food networks: key concepts

One of the key concepts used to describe alternative food networks is the notion of embeddedness originating from the works of Karl Polanyi (see e.g. Polanyi 1968, 2001). In the works of AFN researchers, “embedded food production/distribution” is meant as an opposition to “placeless foodscapes” produced in an industrial way and conventionally distributed (Sonnino 2006). Socially embedded food is connected to a specific territory and submerged in different social relations. For example, Hinrichs sees embeddedness as *social relations, reciprocity and trust* that modify and enhance economic exchange (Hinrichs 2000: 297). For Sage (2003), who describes the development of AFNs in the South-West of Ireland, food becomes socially embedded when *relations of regard* are established. They are built on reciprocity between the producer, who offers high quality food while giving up profit maximization but gaining consumer’s trust and loyalty instead as well as the custom of the consumer.

A very important issue in the context alternative food networks is the question of food re-localization. Analysing specific cases has driven AFN researchers to a conclusion that “local food” is a social construct, as its meaning is socially negotiated. Hinrichs (2003) points to the fact that the borders of the “local” are arbitrary – they are often connected to an administrative unit such as a county of a state. Not all AFNs are based on local food – in the case of the Fair Trade movement. For example, Higgins et al. (2008) distinguish three types of AFN in relations to space – “face to face” (as in a farmers’ market), proximate (CSA, consumer cooperatives) and extended – relying on product certification (certified organic or fair trade products). In the last case, certification is meant to substitute for social embeddedness.

Some other authors point to the fact that the “local” refers not only to the dimension of distance, but also to the time, tradition and history that form the concept of territory (Sylvander 2004). There are many other ways of understanding the notion of local food: by types of marketing channels (number of middlemen in the supply chain), or by production methods – for example sustainable production and distribution techniques (Martinez et al. 2010). This ambiguity is better understood through studying interaction between actors rather than basing it on some pre-defined criteria (Lamine 2005).

Quality of food is another important and disputed notion in the AFN literature. The term “quality turn” is often used to describe alternative food movements, such as Slow Food (Murdoch and Miele 2004). Quality is a multidimensional term which encompasses many traits of food: traceability, aesthetic attributes or nutritional value. Some researchers state that the notion of quality is used in the conventional food discourse and is therefore inadequate in the context of AFNs. Sage (2003) proposes “good food” as a notion that should replace describing alternative food in terms of quality. “Good food” is defined by its properties such as taste, look, socio-cultural environment of its origin, and the social dimension of embeddedness.

The above general overview of the notion of AFN above goes back to the time when the phenomenon began to be analysed by researchers – in the first decade of the 21st Century. After the first studies were published, the mainstream food provisioning system created a response for activist movements by co-option or adapting new marketing strategies (Sonnino 2006, Goodman–Goodman–Dupuis 2013). In the US, the mainstreaming process resulted in the emergence of a billion dollar organic food industry, while many alternative food movements adopted “entrepreneurial” language and strategies (ibidem:136). The so-called “second generation” AFNs have to fight mainstreaming by adopting new strategies, such as e.g. turning to new distribution methods or their own production, employing farmers or using urban plots of land, as is observed in the UK (Goodman, Goodman–Dupuis 2013: 118–128). The other side of the mainstreaming process is the ongoing elitism of the “real” grass-roots, alternative food movements. Many studies from the USA as well as Western Europe indicate that their members tend to be white, highly educated and middle to upper income and can be identified as middle or upper middle class (Hinrichs 2000, Goodman, Goodman–Dupuis 2013: 146, Bryant–Goodman 2013). One of the challenges of the second generation of AFNs is to fight associating AFNs and similar movements with middle classes holding ‘post-materialist’ views that are not shared by the wider population (Goodman–Goodman–Dupuis 2013: 126) and change their exclusionary character.

Recently, authors dealing with the issue of alternatives in food provisioning tend to be more critical of the basic ideological premises of AFNs, for example, challenging assumptions like a romanticized notion of countryside and nature in AFNs (Maye 2013), or the real possibility of mainstreaming sustainable or just food consumption, not as a corporate marketing strategy. Goodman–Goodman–Dupuis (2013) indicate that the division between the alternative and conventional food networks is not sufficient any more to describe the variety of initiatives dedicated to the issue of food production and distribution. The term AFN has often been criticized for being less adequate for precise analysis of recent direction of changes. It is defined in terms of its distinction from the mainstream food system, while it is more and more difficult to draw a clear line dividing the two systems (Sonnino 2006). Some authors point out that the term AFN suggests that only consumers play an active role in creating the network, while some of them are also initiated by farmers (Renting et al 2012).

However, bearing in mind the latest critical stances, the authors of this paper have purposely chosen the term “alternative food networks” to describe the case of the Polish food movements in opposition to the mainstream food system. We understand AFNs as grass-roots, consumer-driven initiatives that are based on direct sales and operate beyond the food market system.

Because their development is very fresh and most of them function as small and informal groups of urban consumers, Polish cooperatives should be treated as “first generation” AFNs, which are only beginning their institutionalization. As our study has shown, the aspect of “alternativeness” is also quite essential for the members of cooperatives as well as for some producers. It is easy to distinguish AFNs from the mainstream, although commercialization of such practices has already begun. We find the use of the term AFN reasonable in the Polish context due to the fact that cooperatives are a marginal phenomenon, still in the making, that has grown from the need of creating an “alternative” to the mainstream food provisioning system.

### Consumer cooperatives as a form of alternative food network (AFN)

Cooperatives are seen as one of the popular forms of alternative food networks in urban areas (Jarosz, 2008). Based on a simple idea of establishing direct links between an organized group of consumers and producers, they are described as “proximate” AFNs (Higgins et al. 2008) or an “institutionalized form of interaction between consumers and farmers, which is co-produced by both of them.” (Jaklin et al. 2015: 44). Cooperatives were supposed to empower ordinary people by establishing enterprises owned and democratically governed by their members (Restakis 2010). Poland has a long tradition of a strong consumer cooperative movement, originating in the middle of the 19th century and flourishing in the inter-war period, that was largely lost during the times of communism and forgotten or distorted after the system transition in 1989 (Piechowski 1999). In the contemporary Polish context, consumer cooperatives are usually small, informal groups with a structure and ideology similar to the Western “new cooperativism” movement (Vieta 2010), associating people who buy food directly from farmers and local food processors. The authors’ observations show that because cooperatives bypass middlemen, they can keep prices of high quality food lower than in regular stores. Cooperatives aim also at creating an alternative to consumerism patterns, such as unlimited consumption or focus on individualism (Bilewicz–Potkańska 2013). Disappointment with the hegemonic food system is a major motive for members of food cooperatives all over Europe. Similar motivation can be found in the case of the Polish cooperatives. However, we can also point to more particular reasons for joining the cooperatives such as choosing a particular lifestyle, where health and ecological issues play an important role. It also concerns an economical motivation – the food purchased in the coop is cheaper than similar products in ecological or quality food stores. Cooperatives are considered a form of a new social movement, seen as laboratories shaping more sustainable forms of social life. They are also regarded as forms of “food citizenships” since consumers take responsibility for organizing the food distribution chain (Goszczyński 2014, 2015). In this sense, even though cooperatives are a marginal phenomenon, they can be viewed as vanguards of change.

### FACTORS INFLUENCING FOOD PURCHASES – THE POLISH CONTEXT

Until recently, Central and Eastern Europe was almost absent in the analysis of the emerging alternative food networks. One of the reasons for scarcity of Polish and, in general, Central European perspectives in the existing literature (for exceptions, see Gorlach et al. 2006, Goszczyński–Knieć 2011) is a relatively low number of initiatives resembling the forms described in the Western literature. In Poland, one of the reasons for such absence lies in the specific character of the agri-food system – understood as “the whole array of activities,

ranging from input distribution through on-farm production to marketing and processing, involved in producing and distributing food to both urban and rural consumers” (Staatz 2000). The Polish agri-food system is shaped partly by the country’s long history as a “peasant state” and, at the same time, its recent rapid economic transformation after the fall of the communist rule in 1989 (Halamska 2011).

### Agricultural model

As the industrial model of food production became the negative point of reference for Western alternative food networks, it is important to note that Polish agriculture, has not yet entirely undergone transformation into the industrial model of large scale, capital intensive farming. Although recently we can observe a tendency to enlarge farm size (see Sikorska 2013), the average size of a Polish farm is still 10.3 hectares (see ARMA 2010), whereas for the EU as a whole the figure is 15 hectares. The still dispersed agricultural sector that retains some traditional production methods, especially in poorer, Eastern regions of the country, could be a suitable base for development of sustainable or ecological agriculture, which consists of only a small percentage of Polish agricultural production.

### The economic factor

One of the reasons for the slow development of local alternative food movements is the economic factor that plays the most important role in the structure of food consumption in Poland (Kwasek 2012). Most of the consumers turn to the still growing sector of supermarket and discount stores to buy food. The system of mass food distribution is relatively new in post-transition Poland and seems attractive for most consumers. This way of purchasing food is convenient and, above all, cheap. As one of the recent national surveys shows (CBOS Report 2013), 73% of Poles buy at least half of their food in discount stores owned by Western companies (the German Lidl or Portugese Biedronka). During the years 2007–2011, the discount stores noted a doubling in sales. The most popular among these, Biedronka, had 2 thousand stores all over Poland in 2011 (Cichomski 2012). 37% Poles buy at least part of their food in the so-called “corner stores”. Traditional markets are getting less popular than they used to be: 50% of Poles never buy food on local marketplaces.

Although according to Eurobarometer (Special Eurobarometer 410), most Poles value quality food, they do not buy accordingly. For example, demand for certified ecological food is still very low. Mean annual spending of an average Polish consumer on ecological food equalled 1.7 % of the amount an average German consumer spends on this type of food (Smoluk-Sikorska 2008: 23). According to Smoluk-Sikorska, even for those who claimed to buy ecologically certified food, it consisted on average of only around 9% of their food purchases.

### Food self-provisioning

Another reason for slow development of AFNs might be a widely popular and vivid tradition of food self-provisioning. People produce some of their food in the backyards or summerhouses popular among urban residents. According to Smith, Kostelecky and Jehlicka (2015), food self-provisioning is very widespread in both Poland and the Czech Republic. For example, in the second half of the 2000s, 54% Polish households were

growing some of their own food, while in Western Europe it was around 10% (Smith–Jehlicka 2013). Food growing is also independent from the social status of the survey participants. Most of the food obtained that way is produced with a low use of pesticides or completely organically (Smith et al. 2015).

Additionally, many people living in cities still have relatives in rural areas who provide them with quality food. As Sikorska's extensive research (2013) has shown, in 2011, similarly to previous years, half of the farmers sold their produce directly on local markets or to their neighbours or family members. According to the author, it is a consequence of dispersal of agricultural production in Poland<sup>3</sup>. These producer-consumer networks were especially popular during the socialist period due to frequent problems with the provisioning of shops. Anthropologist Janine Wedel (1986) emphasized the role of informal networks of reciprocity during the times of "real socialism" – the role of "środowisko" (social environment) that was crucial in "załatwić sprawy" (managing one's own affairs) – which could mean obtaining a passport or a place in a hospital, but also meat or eggs, which were difficult to get in shops, from the countryside. This specific anti-institutional tradition (of informal relations, characteristic of Poland under partition, with citizens organizing against or beyond foreign government structures, a practice to some extent continued under the communist rule), probably has its role in the development of the Polish form of direct food provisioning.

### Post-modern patterns of food-purchase

Beyond the traditional self-provisioning and direct producer-consumer food chains, there is a growing, although yet small in scale, interest among the younger and educated urban populations in both quality (which doesn't always entail local or organic, as it often means ethnic, "cosmopolitan" cuisine using many imported ingredients, see de Solier 2013) and local food. Apart from chic restaurants, the emerging urban middle class is developing an interest in quality food sold on a few organic markets, the so called "breakfast markets", healthy food stores or through online farmer box schemes. The emerging Polish foodie culture is however limited to the largest cities and people with a higher income, since this type of quality food is unaffordable for the larger population. It is the middle class that is seen by researchers as a social base for both foodie culture (de Solier 2013) as well as alternative food networks (Goodman–Goodman–Dupuis 2013, Bryant–Goodman 2013). According to some sociologists, the middle class is weak or almost non-existent in Poland, as historically it was the intelligentsia that played its role (Domański 2012). Currently, it is the intelligentsia and the emerging, but definitely not numerous new middle class that develop AFNs in Poland, as we will show in the later parts of the article.

To summarize, the Polish food distribution system is in general divided between traditional informal networks and food self-provisioning and the dominant, ever growing supermarket and discount chains, gradually eliminating local corner shops and food markets. In this context, new forms of alternative food distribution and consumption are still a marginal phenomenon, although gaining popularity, also because of widespread media attention. Their ideology and organizational patterns are based on their Western counterparts, despite existing local food channels. The still large and not completely industrialized agricultural sector, with many small farms sticking to some of the traditional methods of production could be a good base for the development of food

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<sup>3</sup> "Petty agricultural producers constitute over a half of all users of individual farms in Poland" (Sikorska 2013: 37).

re-localization movements, but they are still on the initial stage of their development.

## CONSUMER COOPERATIVES IN POLAND: CONSUMERS' AND FARMERS' PERSPECTIVE

### A short history of cooperatives, 2010–2015

The first informal, grass-roots cooperative in Poland was established in January 2010 in Warsaw. “Warszawska Kooperatywa Spożywcza” – Warsaw Consumer Cooperative – was created by a small group of friends, most of them young left-wing activists from politically-inclined associations (such as the Young Socialists Association – Młodzi Socjaliści) or informal movements, some of them anarchist in character. Initially, the cooperative purchased conventionally produced fruit and vegetables from a large vegetable wholesale centre on the outskirts of Warsaw, but later, although with some difficulties, it established partnerships with a few small farmers.

The Warsaw Consumer Cooperative soon became a pattern for other cooperatives that emerged in other large Polish cities in the course of the next year: Łódź and Gdańsk. Those two cooperatives, as the former ones, were also established mainly by members of the Young Socialists and situated in the social centres led by the organization in those cities. That is why they adopted not only the ideology of the Warsaw Consumer Cooperative, but also its structure pattern: informal character, no official leaders, functions performed in a rotational way, consensual decision making. They also borrowed the first internet ordering system created by one of the Warsaw Cooperative founders. In the years 2011 and 2012, other cooperatives emerged in larger Polish cities, such as Poznań and Kraków. Some other cooperatives were also established in other districts of Warsaw. They were no longer connected to the Young Socialists, but were similar in terms of structure, values and social milieu in which they operated.

Overall, there were over 30 attempts to establish cooperatives all over Poland. They emerged in the largest cities, such as Warsaw, Łódź, Gdańsk, Poznań, Wrocław, Kraków, Białystok, Lublin, Katowice or Bydgoszcz but also in smaller ones, with around 100 000 or even fewer than 50 000 inhabitants, such as Opole, Zielona Góra, Gliwice, Dąbrowa Górnicza. Not all of them moved beyond launching an Internet or Facebook website. Some of them had to suspend their activity, only to re-emerge later. In 2015, only around 15 cooperatives function regularly, most of them in Warsaw, Kraków and other larger cities. As the following section will show, not all of them resemble those modelled according to the pattern produced by the first Warsaw Cooperative.

### Research methods

The following analysis is based on two-phase research, using ethnographic methods (Babbie 2007). To capture the whole picture of cooperatives as food networks, we decided to interview both consumers and farmers delivering to cooperatives. The first, longer phase consisted of in-depth, unstructured interviews with members of 15 cooperatives (altogether 42 interviews) from different cities all over Poland. We tried to reach all cooperatives active and functioning on a regular basis in the time of the research (2012 – January 2015); not all of them turned out to be accessible, but finally we were able to reach most of them. Most of the interviewees were the more active members of the cooperatives, some of them were also among the initiators



and founders of cooperatives. This means the interviewees were, on the one hand, highly aware of the details of the everyday activity of those groups; they also not only adhered to mainstream cooperative values, but often shaped them and decided how they were realized in practice. However, we also tried to reach members of the small group of the most involved activists, some of them no longer belonging to the cooperatives or inactive members – as that kind of informers can be sources of important information about the studied group (Hammersley–Atkinson, 2007). In general, the interviews focused on most active members, but we tried to retain a balance between different categories of respondents. The interviewees were recruited to the study mainly using the snowball method. Some of them were found through official channels, like contacts on cooperative websites or Facebook sites.

Additionally, the study of the consumers is based on participant observation made by Aleksandra Bilewicz during her 3 year study of consumer cooperatives in the years 2012–2015. Most observations were made in *Warszawska Kooperatywa Spożywcza*, the first of the established consumer cooperatives. Some shorter observations (participation in one shopping session) were made in other cooperatives – in Gdańsk, Poznań, Katowice.

After gathering data about consumers, we turned to the second phase of the research, which was performed at the turn of the years 2014–2015. We decided to interview farmers collaborating with chosen cooperatives using the semi-structured interview scheme (altogether 18 interviews) – in this part of the study, we aimed at acquiring data about the farmers' methods of production, the size and general character of their farms and their motivation to collaborate with cooperatives and the scope and practice of this collaboration. The interviewees were chosen using the snowball method. This part of research was delivered mainly in *Kooperatywa Grochowska* in Warsaw, but also in 5 other cooperatives from Warsaw and Krakow.

### “Activist” cooperatives

The cooperatives studied varied considerably and during the research two distinct types were observed. They have been divided according to the goals they try to meet, members' values and methods of their operation.

The first type of cooperatives, which we call “activist”, is based on an anti-capitalist attitude and alternative lifestyle, which both have a strong effect on their structure, decision-making and types of products sold. One of the Gdańsk activists explained his involvement, referring to understanding a cooperative as an “experiment”: “I want to participate in an experiment that checks, if and to what extent cooperativism can be an alternative to the capitalist system of product distribution and exchange”.

Cooperatives of this type are meant to be grass roots, non-hierarchical, serving also redistributive purposes, based, at least theoretically, on direct relationships with local farmers. Decisions are most often taken consensually at meetings. Almost all cooperatives of this type have established a special “communal fund” (*fundusz gromadzki*), which is collected by adding 10% to the price of each product. Almost all of them are also vegetarian, although most of them, not without discussion and a strong opposition from vegans, decided to buy eggs and cheese.

The members' attitudes to food attributes and to the notion of localness is diverse, but in general we can say that it is based on the values adopted by activist cooperatives, that can be summarized in a form that has been used by many of them: "building a more just, democratic and more environmentally friendly economy". Emphasis is put on food localness and supporting local farmers, but rather for environmental reasons ("food miles") or issues connected to social justice than issues of tradition, taste and territory (Sylvander 2004). Apart from that, healthy food, produced without the use of pesticides, is also an important factor in understanding food quality for cooperative members.

Activist cooperatives are based on an ideology that is detached from issues of territory and local identity. Their members oppose industrial farming and want to support small farmers, but they are rather indifferent to real local conditions of such production, issues such as traditional local products, the specific character of local soils, climate or social relations etc. All that they require from a farmer is to be close to their place of residence (although locality is usually not precisely defined) and sticking to "natural" ways of production (which are not clearly defined, either). In practice, many activist cooperatives experienced difficulties in reaching local farmers. Some of them, trying to meet egalitarian standards, deliberately abstain from buying certified ecological food, since it would raise the prices. Some cooperate with both certified ecological and conventional farmers.

The structure of activist cooperatives seems to be based on the ideas that shaped the "newest social movements" that emerged after the birth of alter-globalist ideas around 1999, according to Canadian sociologist Richard Day (2005). The phenomenon of "new cooperativism" (Vieta 2010, Curl 2010) in Western Europe, the US and South America can be seen as a part of this trend and was especially strengthened after the 2008 economic crisis. The other, albeit less important source of inspiration for new Polish cooperatives was the rich and forgotten tradition of Polish cooperativism, especially the writings of its probably best-known advocate, Edward Abramowski (see Abramowski 2010). Most of the members, however, reported not to be deeply interested in the cooperative tradition and are rather oriented towards Western-driven ideas of ecology, sustainability and social activism. The structure and decision-making system adapted by cooperatives indicates that. One example is consensus decision-making (Bressen 2007), used widely by left-wing movements in the US, also by the "Occupy Wall Street" movement and "Indignados" in Europe. Consensus in cooperatives is a new idea, definitely inspired by the context of new social movements (Buechler 2013). Activist cooperatives have a very loose, leaderless structure, which often leads to problems in sustaining a regular rhythm in their basic functions. One of the exceptions is "Dobrze" cooperative based in Warsaw that decided to register as an association and exploits a cooperative shop run by both members and employees.

### "Consumer-oriented" cooperatives

The second type of cooperatives, which we call "consumption oriented", emerged somewhat later, around 2012, although the first cooperative of this type, Kooperatywa Grochowska, existed as early as 2010 in the form of groups of young mothers buying food directly from producers. Most of the cooperatives of this type are based in Warsaw, there are also examples from Łódź and Kraków.

Consumption-oriented cooperatives have a different structure and are also based on different values.

They emerged as Facebook groups organized to buy quality food from small farms and refined producers. They are called “cooperatives” but lack some substantial features of cooperatives in terms of democratic decision-making – those organizations are mostly governed by so-called “group administrators”, although recently some changes in this model can be observed. Consumption oriented cooperatives have developed some redistribution mechanisms, such as membership fees, but that is not always the case. Cooperative activities are much more individualized, although socializing events, such as picnics or workshops, are also organized. There are however much fewer common meetings than in the activist cooperatives, most of the work is done individually, through the internet. Individual cooperative members are responsible for “actions” for a particular product – they have to contact the producer, gather the orders, and sometimes deliver the product to the place where a shopping session takes place. While activist cooperatives tend to be small, consumer-oriented cooperatives usually have more than 200 members. One of them, Kooperatywa Grochowska based in the Grochów district of Warsaw, even had 700 members at some point and had to reduce membership due to coordination difficulties, since most of the organizational tasks rest on a small group of people. The majority of members didn’t work for the coop, they just did their shopping. It functioned more as a store with quality food. Those who worked for the public good decided that all people not engaged in work, had to quit the coop.

Most of the consumption-oriented cooperative members are people with stable work and a family. One of the founders of the former “Rydz” cooperative from the fashionable Warsaw district of Saska Kępa described other members as “affluent” and “foodies”. They also often describe themselves as busy people who need to spend as little time as possible to do their cooperative shopping. Most of the cooperative members fit into the characteristics of new emerging Polish middle-class understood as professional wage-workers (Domański 2012), a group that is still not numerous. The cooperative structure has been modified to meet their specific needs.

### Comparison of the two types

An important difference between the two types of cooperatives can be found in food quality and prices. In the consumer-oriented type, prices are higher than in most activist cooperatives and the products are more refined. For example, in Kooperatywa Południowa (operating in the south of Warsaw) there was an offer, although not very popular among members, for New Zealand beef and kangaroo meat. Consumer-oriented cooperatives buy organic citrus fruit from Sicily or Cypriot cheese. Most of food sold in cooperatives comes from Poland, but it is hard to call this food policy as “relocalisation”, even if “local food” is not merely considered within the “zero miles” concept. Food is delivered almost from all over the country, from regions specializing in a specific product. For example, rare fish comes from Mazury lake district, some cheeses are also bought in the north of Poland. Farmers and producers delivering to cooperatives come from different communities, usually with no contact with each other.

Understanding food quality is a complex issue in both types of cooperatives. What seems to be crucial in both types is assessing certainty of how and by whom the food is produced. This conviction is most often based on trust to farmers or on other members’ opinions – a recommendation of someone they know is the

decisive factor. As interviews with members have shown, food is perceived as “good” (Sage, 2003) not only because of healthy and ecological production methods, but also because it is considered “real”. Consumers feel a special connection to food bought in cooperatives, which is established by their knowledge of its origins or a personal relationship with its producer. Food bought in a cooperative is of special value for members just because it comes from a cooperative – which practically can mean different things – being local, seasonal, ecologically produced, bought from friends or acquaintances or bought in a large vegetable retail center- but there is always a surplus value which makes food from a cooperative better than ordinary food bought in a supermarket.

For members of consumer oriented cooperatives, taste and health – linked to the wellbeing of the consumer in general – are two dimensions that define “good food”. They are definitely seen as more important than animal welfare or environmental standards of food (e.g., virtually all of the studied consumer-oriented cooperatives deliver meet products to their members). Health standards, understood as “natural” methods of production are also considered important, especially for families with small children, which are prevalent in this type of cooperatives.

While the activists emphasize meeting the environmental and social standards when thinking of food quality, the notion of the local is problematic in case of both types of cooperatives, but especially for consumer-oriented co-ops. Farmers delivering to those cooperatives come from different places of the country. It is not spatial proximity and preexisting social relations referring to local food tradition that bind them with cooperatives, but producing specific, alternative food and the farmers’ ability to contact urban groups of consumers and to answer their needs. The products they deliver is sometimes typical for the region, which makes the “origin of food” perspective (see Fonte 2008) relevant – e.g. the case of Mazurian fish, but in other cases it does not have anything in common with its place of origin – e.g. lavender delivered from Mazury, a Mediterranean plant which is not typical for the region and for Poland as a whole. So, the notion of “territory” seems to play a role, but usually there is no particular region that member of cooperatives stick to.

The second dimension is a matter of a slightly different values of member of cooperatives. In case of activist cooperatives, members are more focused on environmentalism, workers’ (including farmers’) rights, animal welfare. In case of consumer oriented cooperatives, members choose values related more to their own health or health of the family, sometimes also focusing on ecology or preserving traditional farming.

As it was mentioned above, the division is also a matter of organizational issues. In case of the second type of cooperatives, the cooperation is based on social media and meetings mostly on for the purpose of picking the food, the first type is focused on close relations between members and negotiating all issues in a very egalitarian/democratic manner.

The division between activists and consumer-oriented is also based on different social background and occupational characteristics of the majority of members. While activist cooperatives are created by young left-wing intelligentsia, students, graduates, often also NGO employees or the educated precariat, most of the members of consumer-oriented cooperatives are professionals working in international corporations, media, finance or own their own companies. The structure of consumer-oriented cooperatives reflects pragmatism,

individualism and order characteristics of middle class lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984, Gdula–Sadura 2012).

In general, it seems that in both types of Polish cooperatives we witness a similar process of creating exclusionary food movements observed by AFN researchers in the West, but in a local form. Bryant and Goodman (2013) suggest that alternative food is used as a means of social distinction, especially in countries where middle class is a weak and emerging group. Poland is such a country, and as interviews have shown, consuming quality food has become an important part of members' identity. The prices of food indicate that being a member of such cooperative requires economic capital. Prices are slightly lower in activist cooperatives, but there are other barriers that make them almost inaccessible for members coming from other than activist intelligentsia background. Activist cooperative members follow a very particular lifestyle (e.g. biking, being vegetarian or vegan). They describe themselves as "freaks", "individualists", "idealists". People being politically engaged and/or of different lifestyle are often called "the normals" (normalisi) by cooperative members. The normals are criticized by some interviewees for not being active enough, not being politically aware or not understanding how a cooperative works. Thus, being a fully accepted cooperative member requires some specific embodied cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1984, 1986, Zarycki 2008)<sup>4</sup>. As some authors claim, the role of cultural capital is specific in Poland and other Eastern-European countries with lack of sufficient economic resources and is connected to a specific role of the intelligentsia that is perceived as a substitute for Western bourgeoisie (see King–Szelenyi 2004, Zarycki 2008). Activist cooperatives are a kind of exclusive enclaves in which cultural capital plays an important role. It is confirmed by interviews with ex-cooperative members who decided to leave. One of the former members of *Warszawska Kooperatywa Spożywcza* said, referring also to the problem of age: „I just feel much less alternative, I am not an anarchist, and all this together... (...) I feel that I have somehow grown up, this is a milieu of younger people... I have an impression that I don't entirely fit”.

In the case of consumer-oriented cooperatives, lifestyle issues doesn't seem to play such a meaningful role, although sticking to particular food can be also regarded as part of a lifestyle. However, due to the fact that this type of cooperatives function mostly as internet groups, and joining them usually requires no personal contact, we conclude that economic resources is a more important barrier in this case, especially due to the fact that food prices are usually higher. Both type of cooperatives, however, are a kind of elitist enclaves based on distinction from people buying in "conventional stores”.

### Farmers and food manufacturers

The research interviews have shown that the farmers delivering to cooperatives are a specific, distinct group of farmers, applying specific standards to their products.

The age of the interviewed producers ranged from 25 to 53. Most of the research participants were men, most also had a university degree. Almost all of them had strong ties with the city – around twenty five percent of indicated farmers decided to move out to the countryside leaving behind the urban life they

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<sup>4</sup> According to Pierre Bourdieu (see Bourdieu 1984, Zarycki–Warczok 2014), cultural capital are combined forms of knowledge, skills, education and advantages that person has and gives higher position in society. There are three forms of cultural capital: embodied, material and institutionalized. The embodied state of cultural capital is, as Bourdieu explains, "in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu 1986: 243).

had lived before, some combined working in the city with managing their farms. Other have studied in the city, their spouses work in bigger agglomerations. We can infer that cooperation with cooperatives requires knowledge and both social and cultural capital that most of the “usual” farmers probably possess to a lesser extent. For others it may be difficult to find information about cooperatives, they may be simply unaware of alternative ways of food distribution.

The farms of the interviewees varied in terms of size, but all of them can be qualified as small: from 0.9 to 15 hectares. The location of the farms and their distance from the location of cooperatives varied considerably. In the case of the Warsaw cooperatives, the most distant farm was 220 km from Warsaw, the nearest – 20 km. The mean distance was 80 km. In the case of the Cracow cooperative (Wawelska Kooperatywa Spożywcza), located in the south of Poland, the average distance was similar, but all of the farms were located in regions surrounding Cracow – Małopolska and the Carpathian Mountains, as for Warsaw the farmers often came from further regions, such as Podlasie or Mazury. Cracow cooperatives, as interviews have shown, are based on traditional small-scale agriculture from the south regions of Poland. Members of Krakow cooperatives had no major difficulties finding contact with local farmers – in case of Warsaw cooperatives it was much more problematic.

Almost all interviewees inherited their farms from their parents or grandparents. All of them are family farms, and in almost all cases only family members work on the farm. Only in exceptional cases, such as work overload during the season, outside workforce is used. Many farms were based on diversified production, some of them had only animals (goats, hens, pigs) or fruit and vegetables. Most of them, however, maintained both animal and plant production, which is currently rare in Poland.

Only one of the interviewees had a European certificate of ecological farming for the whole farm and two were under conversion. Nevertheless, virtually all of the participants claimed that their production was ecological or “natural”. They either use integrated agriculture methods, effective microorganisms to protect their plants, or try to limit the use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides. Most of the farmers also process food produced on their farms – pickle vegetables, make cheeses, preserves or cold cuts. In most of the cases, food manufacturing was not officially registered, or only partially registered (in Poland, a farmer cannot legally sell processed food without obtaining a permit). One of the registered honey producers also makes mustard, vinegar, and bread on the basis of honey, but she has not registered this additional production. One of the farmers producing cheese suggested that the informal character of the cooperative was adequate to her needs: “I like the cooperative also because no one asks me here to show papers, but when anyone is interested, I always invite them to my farm, everyone can see everything”. Nevertheless, cooperative administrators in consumer-oriented cooperatives demand current veterinary documents from meat producers and certificate confirmation from certified organic farmers.

There are two main reasons for farmers to decide to work with cooperatives. The first can be called ideological, the other – financial and organizational. In their opinion, working with a cooperative is an alternative to big retail companies, it is also treated as an opportunity to popularize “good food”. Contact with the consumer and a possibility to know their opinion was also important. Farmers and manufacturers emphasized

that for the consumers what and how they buy and eat play a very meaningful role. Two interviewees stressed the prestigious role of meeting complicated demands of cooperative members – being able to do fulfill the expectations was treated as a proof that their food was good, which stimulates producers to keep and improve quality standards.

Prestige and direct contact with consumers is obviously linked with financial motivation– prices that the farmers and manufacturers can dictate in cooperatives are higher than those in retail centers. It was also important for the interviewees that food was preordered, so they know exactly the amount to prepare and none gets wasted.

As stated above, food relocalisation (Sonnino–Marsden 2006) and network character are important factors in building alternative food networks. Therefore interviewees were also asked about their potential collaboration with other institutions such as local authorities, NGOs and other farmers from the community. None of the interviewees had any authority or local institution support in their production or food distribution. We have to stress that most of the interviewees do not seek such support. One of the farmers rhetorically asked: “Do the local authorities help anyone?”

Only 2 interviewees confirmed cooperation with another local farm. One participant bought additional ingredients for meat preserves from a neighbor, another based most of his production on meat bought from local slaughterhouses. Other interviewees declared no cooperation with other farms because of not being sure if their neighbors’ production was trustworthy, if they met standards of production which the participants considered important and a source of pride and prestige. They feared that using others’ produce could contribute to losing good opinion among consumers. It suggests lack of trust for their neighbors, but is also a result of an exceptional, elitist character of the farms that choose to be the cooperative deliverers. Let us quote one quite extreme but meaningful statement about cooperation with other local farmers: “No, firstly, I don’t know anyone who would be interested, but also because the things I do are important for me from the ideological point of view – animal welfare is most important for me. We came up with the “fairfarm” concept – I don’t want to sell rural milk, I want to sell milk from happy goats. I won’t cooperate with anyone who keeps the goats chained”.

The farmers also have declared no cooperation with each other in delivering their produce, mainly due to the fact that they are located far from each other. Many of the farmers started working with cooperatives only recently, so they do not have many opportunities to meet other producers. Not many of them showed though any interest in initiating such cooperation.

The main feature of all the farmers is that they operate on small scale farms (under 15 ha), which are considered by some economists too small for sufficient income (Baer-Nawrocka, 2014). Even that most of them are not EU-certified ecological farms, all of the farmers declare their production to be sustainable. Over half of the suppliers are new rurals, who took over farms recently and treat their occupation not only as a source of income but also as mean to improve life quality both of their families and their customers. Farmers delivering food to cooperatives are loosely connected with their own communities. They also reluctantly cooperate with other farmers delivering food to cooperatives. Polish farmers as a whole group are characterized by low level

of social capital, including low level of social trust (Fedyszak-Radziejowska, 2014). Those who are engaged in food cooperatives are also quiet reluctant for cooperation, that is due to lack of social trust. The cooperation is usually initiated by consumers. However, as cooperatives are becoming more popular, more farmers seek the possibility to deliver their products to cooperative members.

### Cooperatives as social enclaves

#### *Class/ lifestyle enclaves*

After investigating the consumer and producer part of alternative food networks, it has become visible that they possess characteristics that we decided to label with a common term of “enclave” character. To some extent, their elitist character resemble their Western counterparts, described as “exclusionary” in terms of skin colors or class (Jarosz 2008, Goodman–Goodman–Dupuis 2013). In the Polish context, both economic and cultural factors play a role, making cooperatives a place for the more affluent (especially consumption-oriented ones) or educated and following a particular, alternative lifestyle (activist type). Activist cooperatives are formed by groups of friends among young and socially engaged intelligentsia connected to particular social organizations or informal groups. Although they declare openness in fact the membership requires embodied cultural capital as well and social capital specific to the group of activists. For consumer oriented cooperatives, it is mainly economic capital that creates the barrier, although lifestyle issues and values can also play a role. The exclusionary character of the cooperatives is also visible on the producer side of the coin – as the farmers delivering to cooperatives are educated people strongly connected to urban networks, which allows them an easy cooperation with consumer groups and adapting their production to the needs of an alternative food network.

#### *Food enclaves*

The cooperatives can be seen as enclaves also from the food system point of view: they enable a new way of distribution of local, quality, often ecologically certified food, but due to the low demand for that kind of food in Poland, as discussed above, their expansion will be unavoidably limited in present conditions. The other limit of this form of those food networks in terms of food issues is its weak connection to particular regions – the territorial side of food localness (Sylvander 2004). As we have shown, members of activist cooperatives define local food in terms of distance (“food miles”), while the consumption-oriented ones pick regional products from all over Poland, without establishing any specific connections with a particular region, and that could strengthen the links between local producers and encourage their self-organizing.

#### *Cooperation problems*

The “enclave” character of the cooperatives can be attributed also to other aspects of how the cooperatives interact in their social surroundings. It encompasses both the position of cooperatives in their urban milieu, the relationship with other cooperatives, as well as the interaction between farmers delivering to cooperatives and their own role in the rural communities.



The other sense of the “enclave” notion in the consumer context is that the cooperatives work mainly independently, with little collaboration with each other or other institutions. Although until now four cooperative “rallies” were organized in three largest Polish cities, the participating members were unable to organize cooperation for a larger scale, not only in terms of linking the food networks together, but, for example, in terms of establishing a body that could facilitate solving the common problems of cooperatives or enable lobbying for changing the law to make easy registration of a cooperative possible.

The enclave characteristics are also visible in the producer context. Farmers connected to cooperatives are rarely closely bound with their local communities – none of the interviewees looked for support of local organizations, local government or cooperated with neighbours in order to produce or sell food. Almost all interviewed farmers are educated people, some are back-to-the-landers who decided to take over the farms of their families, some were born in the city and bought land to establish ecological, natural and animal welfare-friendly food production. We can infer that there is a social and cultural barrier between the rural community and the separated farmers, which is strengthened by a difference in production methods. Urban consumers, not members of their local communities, are an important point of reference for this group of farmers in terms of lifestyle and values. Most of the interviewed farmers sell their produce not only to cooperatives but also on high quality food marketplaces, organized more and more often in larger cities.

Relationships with farmers, although declared by the cooperative members as desirable, are not very stable and deep. Practically, most of the cooperative members, especially in activist cooperatives, have few “real life” contacts with suppliers. However, in a slow and specific way, some relations between the city and the country are re-established.

### *Potential explanations*

The “enclave character” of the cooperatives seems to be a distinctive feature that could probably be also observed in other Polish AFNs. It could be explained by many potential factors – one of them is a low level of social trust as well as a low level of engagement in activities for the benefit of one’s own community (Czapiński–Panek 2014) that has its roots in Polish history, especially in the long period of lack of independence, and was strengthened in the communist times and also during the years of transformation (Szafraniec 2002). This results in the general weakness of the Polish civic activity. In this context, it seems relevant to refer to Gliński’s and Palska’s thesis on the enclave character of civic activity in Poland, understood as “intensive social activity taking place in isolated spheres of social life and concerning relatively alienated, “excluded” social milieus” (Gliński–Palska 1997: 371). According to Gliński, the enclave civic activity can either take a form of “exclusive niches” or outer-oriented enclaves influencing their social and institutional surroundings (Gliński 2006: 183). While “enclave activity” according to Gliński and Palska referred to NGOs, which began to develop in Poland only after 1989, in our opinion it can also be attributed to informal social activities, among them alternative food networks. According to our interpretation, activist cooperatives were initially designed as “outer oriented enclaves” in the sense that they declared aim was to influence food distribution and democratize the economy, they turned out to be exclusive niches for radical intelligentsia, and turned to be themselves quite ephemeral

in character – many of those small, informal organizations do not function on a regular basis, some have already disappeared. Consumer oriented coops were from the beginning thought as networks created to fulfil the needs of their members, so the exclusive niche description can also be applied in this context.

Thus, it is probable that the Polish alternative food networks are not only exclusionary in terms of class or social background, as is reported about their Western counterparts – there are more dimensions of their enclave, isolated character, also because of weak cooperation between the cooperatives themselves and between producers. Further comparative research should show whether those features are specific to Poland and/or Eastern European AFNs, or if are they connected with the initial stage of AFN development in this country.

## CONCLUSION

Our study has shown that Polish consumer cooperatives face some similar features and problems as those in the Western Europe and North America, however, some of their other features, among them development barriers indicate their specific, local character. As the first generation of AFN in the West, they are small, grass-roots initiatives popular among the more educated and/or wealthy part of the population. The class character of the cooperatives, especially the activist ones created by the young radical intelligentsia, can be even more important and persistent due to the specific role of cultural capital in Poland as well as the growing need for social distinction in the emerging professionals class (the case of consumer-oriented cooperatives). The research has confirmed the problematic and subjective character of the basic notions used to describe AFNs: food quality, which is understood differently by different cooperative members, as well as the notion of local food that turned out to be rather blurred and practically non-existent in consumer-oriented cooperatives. Also, the dimension of social embeddedness in the form of “relations of regard” between consumers and farmers is not always realized according to the values declared by cooperatives. The specific, enclave character of the cooperatives is strengthened by difficulties in cooperation between members and between cooperatives, and also, on the other hand, by the situation in the countryside, where consciously alternative, sustainable and/or ecological farms are a minority and operate rather in isolation from other conventional farmers. The producers delivering to cooperatives represent sustainable or animal welfare oriented modes of farming that are often unusual in their local communities, and they rarely cooperate with other local farmers, NGOs or local authorities.

The future of the Polish consumer cooperatives is vague. On one hand, they have considerably developed over the last 5 years. Also, the structure of Polish farming seems to facilitate the extension of such alternative food networks. But the cooperatives, after an initial enthusiasm, are developing very slowly. Many cooperatives, especially the activist ones, face some difficulties or have even suspended their activities due to internal problems with cooperation and member engagement. However, we have to bear in mind that cooperatives are still in an initial state of their development and they can be perceived as “laboratories” of more sustainable forms of social life, while interest in quality food and sustainable agriculture is growing. One of the problems could be that the activist cooperatives have somehow mechanically adapted Western ideas, categories and

structures, without thoroughly recognizing local conditions, such as situation of local farmers and their mode of production, or consumer preferences. The first activist cooperatives strongly refer to the structure and ideas of the Western newest social movements, only partly basing on the local cooperative tradition, largely lost during the times of planned communist economy and liberal economic transformation (Brodziński 1999). Consumer-oriented cooperatives that emerged somewhat later can be seen as a better and more functional adaptation to local condition (e.g. a more individualized work organizing), but they go even further away from cooperative values and resemble buying groups, which could be also interpreted as a mainstreaming strategy. By now, they however remain independent from the commercial context.

Our study suggests that the shape of alternative food networks in Poland is dependent on larger processes and divisions in the Polish society connected to the post-transformation and semi peripheral status of the country. An example is the “enclave character” of the cooperatives connected to the nature of informal networks in the Polish society and the role of cultural capital, or cooperation difficulties connected to the general weaknesses of the civic activity in Poland (that can be explained by historical turbulences). Further investigations are needed to the trajectory of development of consumer cooperatives in Poland, also in comparison with other Eastern European countries.

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