



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



RICHERS
RENEWAL, INNOVATION AND CHANGE:
HERITAGE AND EUROPEAN SOCIETY

RICHERS “RENEWAL, INNOVATION AND CHANGE: HERITAGE AND EUROPEAN SOCIETY”

Food Heritage and Culture: Changing Spaces of Production
and Consumption

March 2016

INTRODUCTION

RICHERS is a research project funded by the European Commission within the 7th Framework Programme in the domain of Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities. Its main objective is to reduce the distance between people and culture, recalibrating the relationship between heritage professionals and heritage users in order to maximise cultural creativity and ensure that the whole European community can benefit from the social and economic potential of cultural heritage.

RICHERS looks at the role of cultural heritage in forging European cohesion and identity. It asks how cultural heritage can be a force in the new EU economy, and how EU citizens can play a co-creative role in shaping and representing their cultural heritage.

Within this context, RICHES has investigated the role of local food projects which engage with the many rich and varied elements of European food culture. The research makes clear that across Europe, there has emerged a dynamic vein of community-led food initiatives, which seek to reconnect people with food cultures that have been threatened by the rise of convenience and fast foods, the erosion of food knowledge and skills, and the emergence of monocultures in food and farming. Such projects have potential to revive endangered practices of food production, and at a community level, can contribute to the transmission of knowledge and skills about food, the preservation of food heritage, and improved understanding and tolerance between different socio-economic groups. Yet their ability to flourish is often challenged by:

- competing pressures on urban space, which mean that community groups often have only precarious access to land for growing;
- societal trends, which encourage consumption of food that is fast, cheap and unhealthy;
- threats to biodiversity, especially the loss of seed varieties which undermine the very fabric of locally distinctive food cultures.



Magenta Spreen or 'fat hen' cultivated by members of the Sikh Community in the West Midlands, England

The aim of this policy brief is to highlight the growth of community-led food initiatives and the changing spaces of food production and consumption. It shows how food culture can be a force for change and how citizens can co-create cultural heritage around food. It provides some brief examples of community-led food initiatives and makes recommendations for policies which are needed to enable these to thrive.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

There is a long history of growing and sharing food in communities across the EU. Prior to industrialisation, the majority of people worked in agriculture and related sectors, and depended on the food economy in some way for survival. With the growth of factory working in urban centres, food habits changed, but it was still not uncommon to find gardens and livestock inside the city. Indeed, a number of 'model villages' were constructed by industrialists to provide workers with good quality housing, which included spaces for food growing (examples include Port Sunlight in England, with community allotments, and Crespi d'Adda in Italy where each house had a vegetable garden). People remembered and reproduced their cultures of food production and preparation as they migrated to towns; even today, many urban residents are only a generation removed from the countryside and around half of the EU population still lives in intermediate or predominantly rural areas.

Counter-balancing and sometimes overwhelming this long tradition of community scale food cultures, has been a rapid and dramatic transformation of the way in which most people procure their food on a daily basis. Although there are important differences between the EU member states¹, the general trend has been for food to be purchased from large retailers (with increasing concentration of the sector) and for eating outside the home to become more common, with a corresponding tendency for ready-made meals and convenience foods to replace meals cooked from raw ingredients. There is now a widespread availability of global, standardised brands of products and catering outlets (famously called the 'McDonaldization' of society (Ritzer 1993)). The ingredients for this food system are provided largely by industrialised, productivist farming which

¹ Within this general picture, differences in the profile of the food retail sector and in food cultures exist between Eastern and Western European countries, the Mediterranean and Scandinavian countries. There are also significant differences in rates of overweight and obesity, although the problem is recognized as a Europe-wide one.

works in tandem with the application of commercial property rights to seeds and genetic materials. The food system globally now depends on a limited number of plant and animal varieties, which in turn has reduced dietary diversity and threatens the survival of local cultures of food and farming.



Uplands allotment, England

Over recent years, people have become increasingly aware of the impacts of these changes and have also experienced economic austerity which, as history shows, often provokes a return to domestic food production. Partly as a result, but also driven by an interest in reconnecting with food, nature and identity, there has been a rise in community-led initiatives to restore food to its central place in peoples' daily lives. There are no European-wide data on the scale of this activity although some idea can be gained by looking at the revival of home food production². Despite the lack of quantitative data, there is no doubt that examples of community-led food projects are found in all countries, and also that thousands of European citizens are involved in international networks that have been established in this arena (such as Slow Food International, URGENCI, La Via Campesina). In the RICHES project we have looked in more depth at how this interest is being expressed in Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom. In all three countries, there persist traditional forms of community food production in gardens and allotments, but it is also taking place in new spaces such as roadsides, rooftops, schools and reclaimed lands, and with new organisational formats. For example, in *Community Supported Agriculture* in the UK, or *Solidarische Landwirtschaft* in Germany and *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidali* in Italy, consumers make partnerships with farmers and growers in their locality, agreeing to buy a share of the harvest and to accept the risk as well as the rewards of farming. They commit to eat seasonally, to eat what is grown (not choose from a supermarket) and usually to share some of their labour. There are also thousands of examples of urban food initiatives oriented towards generating inter-cultural and inter-generational exchange around the growing, preparing and sharing of food, such as Pisa's vegetable gardens, Rostock's 'Open Fair Brunches' and the 'Sowing New Seeds' project in several of England's cities. The latter is specifically focused on creating opportunities for new migrants and longer established residents to share knowledge and exchange seeds from 'exotic' crop varieties which can be grown in Northern Europe. In some cases, these initiatives benefit from the support of local authorities, which make space available to them, but they tend to emerge outside of formal heritage institutions. They are concerned with living and evolving cultures, which draw on older

² Clues are provided in Church et al's (2015) analysis of 2003 and 2007 data from the European Quality of Life Survey (15 EU countries – Austria, Belgium, Lux, Germany, Portugal, Greece, Italy, Finland, UK, France, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, Netherlands, Ireland). It showed that in 2003, 9.61% of respondents from EU15 reported growing their own food; by 2007 this rose to 15.5%. Another example is the rise of domestic livestock production. For instance, although there are no official figures, media reports have estimated that up to 750,000 households in the UK keep domestic chickens.

traditions and knowledge; their aim is to breathe life into these, rather than try to preserve or 'freeze' them in time. In addition, these food cultures are open to new influences, just as European food culture always has been: growing and sharing of food together creates opportunities for new migrants and longer-term residents to interact and build mutual understanding. Finally, another important aspect is the continued work of various seed libraries and seed sovereignty initiatives, which are trying to protect the diversity of local seeds. The "seed savers" ("custodi dei semi") in Italy and the "seed guardians" in the UK consist of networks of hundreds of people that save, grow and share local seeds, to resist the homogenisation of plant life.

Community-led food initiatives show how culture can be a force for change and how citizens can co-create cultural heritage by:

- Maintaining and developing food skills and knowledge
- Remembering, and reviving food heritage
- Creating social ties and new economic spaces

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community-led food initiatives can offer many lessons for cultural heritage professionals seeking a more active engagement of citizens with cultural resources. These initiatives can be regarded as experimental spaces in which the participants engage in the co-construction of shared food cultures. This involves learning by doing, and building processes of democratic, 'reflexive governance'³, to promote social inclusion. The projects combine 'hands on' practical engagement with growing and cooking, and the use of social media and digital technology to communicate and build communities around food.



Pakistani Keera cucumber

There are many opportunities to link food culture with the arts and creative sectors such as through festivals of film, performance arts, and crafts. Food culture in this way can become a basis of the construction of culture economies which can deliver regional and local development. An example

³ The concept of 'reflexive governance' has been developed in the research literature concerning the construction of food systems through democratic processes which enable collective learning and adaptation. See for example Du Puis and Goodman 2005

is Slow tourism, which links food culture with leisure, in the framework of a re-prioritising the 'experience' of travel over the 'acquisition' of destinations.

In terms of policies, food is cross-cutting, so policy makers need to be aware of how different funding sources, policies and strategies could be combined within the framework of territorial or 'place-based' development. For example, intensive agricultural development can have a profound effect on historical irrigation systems of high cultural value⁴:

- Europe's **cohesion policy** has a renewed emphasis on supporting community-led local development.
- The **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development** will continue supporting the conservation and upgrading of rural cultural heritage (on which €1.2 billion was invested from 2007-13), and the **European Maritime and Fisheries Fund** will finance community-led development projects that promote cultural heritage – including maritime cultural heritage in fisheries areas.
- Europe's **food quality policy** protects food products with quality attributable to place of origin, through the Protected Designation of Origin and Protected Geographical Indications schemes. These can help to protect foods that draw on distinct local farming and food cultures.
- European Parliament's **cultural heritage resolution** "Towards an Integrated Approach to Cultural Heritage for Europe"⁵ stresses the importance of gastronomic heritage, which must be protected and supported. It also considers that the resources allocated to this area can be optimised through interaction with other EU policies, such as the common agricultural policy and consumer protection policy.

This policy brief recommends that the 'bottom-up' development of community food projects should be nurtured through policy tools to support it and by removing the barriers to growth. The key is to enable people to develop their projects, rather than attempt to regulate or standardise such efforts. The aim should be to develop a diverse ecosystem of community food initiatives, by providing the right conditions and this policy brief recommends:

- Protecting communal spaces for growing, preparing and sharing food.
- Supporting initiatives which enable people to 'learn by doing' such as, for example, helping out on farms, taking part in cookery exchanges, being involved in the restoration of food heritage sites such as walled gardens, community orchards, city farms etc.
- Ensuring that young farmers have access to land so that they can try out their innovations and build new business models.
- Making sure that rural areas have high quality broadband connections: digital technology and smart media are vital to enable sharing of ideas and building a sense of community.
- Recognising and valuing the direct and indirect benefits of community-growing initiatives, which according to research include: improvements in health and wellbeing; contribution to social cohesion; maintaining, restoring and improving urban environments (including built heritage and green spaces); enhancing urban biodiversity; supporting rural economies in the farming, tourism and craft sectors.
- Recognising that seeds are part of Europe's cultural heritage common property and that their diversity needs to be protected.
- Finding ways to share examples of best practices; undertake more systematic cross-cultural research in order to generate a more accurate picture of the full scale of community food activities across the EU and to help facilitate the exchange of ideas and learning.

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_briefs/policy-brief-memola-112015.pdf#view=fit&pagemode=none

⁵ European Parliament resolution of 8 September 2015, *Towards an Integrated Approach to Cultural Heritage for Europe* (2014/2149(INI)): section 18.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The research consisted of a desk review of published research and data on the topic of community-led food projects, and case studies of examples from Germany, Italy and the UK. The case studies were compiled using secondary data and semi-structured interviews with leading members of the projects.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME

RICHES: Renewal, Innovation and Change: Heritage and European Society

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FUNDING SCHEME

FP7 Framework Programme for Research of the European Union
SSH.2013.5.2-2 Transmitting and benefiting from cultural heritage in Europe

DURATION

December 2013 - May 2016 (30 months)

BUDGET

EU contribution: 2,432,356 €

WEBSITE

RICHES website: <http://www.riches-project.eu/>

RICHES resources website: <http://resources.riches-project.eu/>

RICHES blog on Digital Meets Culture: <http://www.digitalmeetsculture.net/riches/>

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Use the hashtag #richesEU to join the RICHES Project community on Twitter.

Subscribe to the RICHES Project YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/richesEU

FURTHER READING

Church, A., Mitchell, R., Ravenscroft, N., Stapleton, L. (2015) 'Growing your own': a multi-level modeling approach to understanding personal food growing trends and motivations in Europe, *Ecological Economics* 110: 71-80

Du Puis, M. and Goodman, D. (2005) Should we go 'home' to eat?: towards a reflexive politics of localism, *Journal of Rural Studies* 21(3): 359-371

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<http://www.slowfood.com>

<http://www.urgenci.net>

<http://viacampesina.org/en/>

<http://www.cfgn.org.uk/>

All images with kind permission by Anton Rosenfeld, the of the 'Growing From Your Roots' project at Garden Organic, England.