

## AUTHENTICITY THREATS ON FARMERS' MARKETS: A LESSON GAINED FROM IRELAND

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**Abstract:** The loss of the authenticity was identified among the major issues problematic for the sustainability of farmers' markets FMs. The aim of this study is (1) to explore the actual practice and current trends on FMs in the context of the FM authenticity, and (2) to derive lessons for FMs in Czechia, which stands for a former communist country where FMs emerged only recently, from a case study in Ireland, a Western traditional free market environment with a longer tradition of FMs. The work is based on a study conducted on six FMs in Ireland which included interviews with organisers and vendors, and observations. The findings show that while the concessions from FM principles (i.e. conventionalisation) can endanger FM exceptional (alternative) position within the food retailing, it significantly improves the FM attractiveness which is essential for FM sustainability. The right management is strategic when preventing the threat of the authenticity loss deriving from the conventionalisation.

**Key words:** farmers' markets; alternative food networks; food; consumption; Ireland; Czechia

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Alternative food networks (hereinafter AFNs) in general developed as a response to the threats resulting from the mainstream agricultural production (Roberts, 2008). Range of networks of producers and consumers offering alternative food provisioning opportunities have been broadly embraced by consumers. As such, AFNs (e.g. farmers' markets, box schemes, community supported agriculture) are a "genuine challenge to the mainstream food industry and treadmill agriculture" (Sage, 2003, p. 49) even though they globally represent only a minor food provisioning strategy. FMs specifically gained their popularity because they offer an alternative to the anonymous and alienated environment of conventional superstores by providing the "social connection" (p. 48) which normal food shops cannot offer (Hinrichs, 2000 in Sage, 2003).

FMs firstly appeared as part of the alternative food networks' movements in the US and they became established within American foodscape in the late 1970s (Pea-

cock, 1999). Since 1983, over 3,500 new markets have been started in the USA and over 450 in the UK (Coster and Kennon, 2005). After the expansion to Western Europe, FMs were introduced to the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In the case of Ireland, the first market was opened in 1996 in Cork (Sage, 2003). The history of Czech FMs started in 2010 in Prague (Spilková et al., 2013). The first FM in the Slovak capital Bratislava was opened only recently in 2012 (SITA, 2012). Circumstances standing behind the FMs' birth geographically vary (Guthrie et al., 2006). Thus one could conclude that it implies the heterogeneity of FMs in different socioeconomic and political contexts. Anyway, FMs try to achieve the same goals in the different settings. Therefore the geographical perspective is highly desirable when studying the FM phenomenon.

A lot of research has been done to study FMs from different viewpoints. FMs have been broadly studied from the retail perspective (Guthrie, 2006; Murphy, 2011; Spilková et al., 2013). The viability of FMs in rural communities was examined by Schmit and Gómez (2011). Moore (2006) explored the socio-environmental value of shopping on FMs. Beckie et al. (2012) described the clustering and innovative potential of FMs. Alkon (2008a) conducted an ethnographical study on FMs participants' negotiations between economic, social justice and environmental strategies. With regards to the short-term history of FMs in CEE, there is a gap in the academic literature on making linkages between the phenomenon of FMs in the Western traditional free market environment with a longer tradition of FMs and the post-communist context of CEE, where FMs emerged only recently. Thus the first aim of this work is to fill in this gap by drawing on the knowledge derived from a case study conducted in Ireland, which has a longer tradition of FMs, to design instead of draw lessons for FMs in Czechia with a more recent experience with FMs.

FMs and AFNs, in general, developed in reaction to the growing distance between producers and consumers elicited by the productivist approach in agriculture. For instance, Atkins and Bowler (2001) demonstrate on the example of the Great Britain that whereas urban population was supplied by food from the close vicinity in the 19th and early 20th century, food production in cities declined within the 20th century. The gradual extension of food supply chains consequently cut down farmers' revenues as the substantial power of big processors and retailers over farming sector allowed them to squeeze the purchasing costs below the production level (Guthrie, 2006). The aim of AFNs is to eliminate this stress of food producers by reconnecting them with consumers (Kneafsey et al., 2008).

Even though there is a number of studies devoted to the AFNs' phenomenon, there are voices calling for a more critical approach evaluating how AFNs meet the goals ascribed to them (Tregear, 2011). AFNs are typically characterized by the food quality, tradition, craftsmanship and direct marketing (Sage, 2012). An attribute ascribed to FMs (and some other AFNs) is the local provisioning, which is embodied in the transparent and clearly verifiable origin of products (sometimes) assured by the direct contact between producers and consumers (Alkon, 2008b). On the other hand, in the attempts to increase the attractiveness of FMs, there is an apparent trend to adapt FMs to consumers' demand which might include incorporating prac-

tices not matching the FM principles exactly. This tendency arouses an indication of the so-called conventionalisation which is perceived with concerns among academics dealing with AFNs (e.g. McEachern et al., 2010; Seyfang, 2006). Therefore, the second aim of this study is to bring new insights on the actual practice in terms of the authenticity on FMs in Ireland and Czechia.

At first, I will explore the context and origins of FMs both in Ireland and Czechia. Then I will be speaking about the problems and challenges which FMs face in these days. After the description of the methodology used I will turn my attention to the result section. It will focus on the roots of FMs popularity, the impact of the economic recession on FMs and the so-called conventionalisation of FMs. Finally, the organisers' and vendors' reflections on the management of FMs will be described. I will conclude with a discussion on the implications derived from the case study of FMs in Ireland for the Czech FMs.

## **2 THE EMERGENCE OF FMs IN IRELAND AND IN CZECHIA**

Before turning our attention to the story of the birth of FMs, the geographical and economic context of both countries will be briefly described to improve the understanding of the roots of the current situation of FMs in Ireland and Czechia regarding the farming and consumption history of both countries. Ireland (70,286 km<sup>2</sup>) and Czechia (78,867 km<sup>2</sup>) have a similar area but the Czech population (10,505,445) is over twice as big (Ireland 4,582,769 inhabitants in 2012 – Eurostat, 2013). The Irish GDP (32,299 EUR) represents approx. 160% of the Czech GDP (20,200 EUR). The employment rate in the Czech primary sector reached 2.2% in 2012 (Zemědělský svaz ČR, 2013) and 4.5% in 2011 in Ireland (Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine, 2013).

Ireland is a traditional free market economy with a strong agricultural tradition based on family farming, thus small family farms are historically integrated into Irish rural economy. On the other hand, Czechia is a former communist country with the agricultural sector constituted mainly of big companies. These emerged through the post-socialist transformation from cooperatives and state farms which were built by collectivisation process in the socialist era (Bičík and Jančák, 2005). Family farms in bigger volumes started emerging in Czechia only after the fall of the communist regime at the beginning of the 1990s. Up to now, they represent a minority within the Czech agricultural sector. The average utilised area per farm in Czechia (84.2 ha) was in 2005 almost three times bigger than in Ireland (31.8 ha) although the EU average (11.9 ha) was even lower (DG for Agriculture and rural development, 2008).

### **2.1 Ireland**

Ireland has its long specific tradition of the so called Country Markets. These are co-operative businesses which enable marketing of “the shareholders' ” fresh

farm, garden and home produce and handcrafts' on indoor markets (Bord Bia, 2014). Apart from that, some big Irish cities like Cork and Galway have had traditional big city markets. First “new style” FM was probably established in Cork only in 1996 (Sage, 2003). Since that time, FMs have been gradually emerging all over the country. In 2009, quality and authenticity of FMs was encouraged by the launch of The Code of Good Practice for Farmers' Markets (available from Bord Bia, 2013). In July 2013, Bord Bia registered 143 FMs and another 63 Country Markets (Bord Bia, 2013).

## 2.2 Czechia

While city markets used to be the main food provisioning facilities in Prague until the end of the first world war (described in Státníková, 2010), they were almost eliminated (with the exception of some big city markets) during the communist era which did not favour private entrepreneurship. Anyway, the rapid retail boom introducing large superstores since the 1990s (Spilková, 2012) suppressed the market tradition. Thus, FMs were welcomed as a fashionable rediscovered tradition, when the first new-style FMs appeared in Prague in 2010. During the following year, new FMs appeared in many Prague districts. The FMs boom continued to spread from Prague to smaller cities and towns in 2012 thus a dense network of FMs has been created in Czechia up to present (Spilková et al., 2013). Currently, there are around 170 FMs organized on regular basis in Czechia (Nakupujte lokálně, 2013). In 2011, the launch of FMs was supported by a subsidy scheme realized by the Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic (Ministerstvo životního prostředí ČR, 2011). At the same time, Ministry of Agriculture issued FMs Code which defines the good practices of FMs stallholders on the voluntary basis (Ministerstvo zemědělství ČR, 2011).

The main drivers of the FMs development are supposed to be the recent emergence of a number of small farmers looking for new markets and consumers' dissatisfaction with the poor reputation of the conventional food production, i.e. food quality and consequent health concerns (Surovátková et al., 2014). The freshness and taste, generally the better quality of goods is the main motivation for shopping on Czech FMs, as it was found out on a sample of customers in Prague (Spilková et al., 2013). This is because of the repeated scandals with quality of food produced by big agricultural companies and sold through retail chains (e.g. Brož, 2012, Hrdinová, 2012). These incidents are well known among Czech consumers as Jánková (2009) or Holec (2011) refer to Czechia as the “European dustbin”. The hunting for poor quality food products and revealing of bad practices of retail chains became something like a national sport as the biggest Czech commercial TV employed a specialist to make inspections in food stores and report about it in its main evening news (TV Nova, 2013). To sum it up, Czech FMs benefit from the poor reputation of conventional food production and serve as guarantors of quality food.

### **3 FMs NOWADAYS: THEORY AND PRACTICE**

According to the Dictionary of Human Geography, AFNs were established to “redistribute value through the network against the logic of bulk commodity production and reconvene ‘trust’ between food producers and consumers”. This enables them to “articulate new forms of political association and market governance” (Gregory and Johnston, 2009, p. 259). The aim of FMs specifically is to support small producers and local economies and give consumers the opportunity to buy high quality and healthier food in a more intimate environment by reconnecting them on FMs. However, one could observe some trends in FM development whose ability to match the FM principles is unclear. These include the social exclusivity (e.g. Goodman, 2009) and conventionalisation of FMs. Moreover, some problematic issues for FM future relating specifically to the post-communist context were revealed in Czechia (Spilková and Perlín, 2013). Both the general and the post-communist context specific issues will be explained below.

#### **3.1 Some issues problematic for FM future**

Consumers' trust in the FM exceptionality is strategic for the success of FMs (Moore, 2006). To keep their customers' interest, FMs' organisers have to make sure that the declared principles of FMs (such as the FMs Code used in Czechia), for which customers are willing to pay premium prices, are kept to the highest standard. Thus the need for the authenticity of FMs stands behind the premium prices on FMs. On the other hand, FMs were repeatedly criticised for their upper class orientation because of their exceptional reputation and premium prices (Goodman, 2009). AFNs, in general, have repetitively been accused from their social exclusivity (e.g. Alkon and McCullen, 2010) because these networks are typically practiced by white urban middle class (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Therefore the reality instead of real practice goes against the idea of the equal access to quality food even though the social justice in food accessibility should be an integral part of all AFNs' movements (Alkon, 2008b). The recent global economic recession brought a new perspective to this paradox, as it significantly affected consumers' spending.

The conventionalisation represents another issue mentioned in association with FM evolution (Spilková and Perlín, 2013). Murphy (2011) noted that the characteristics, which distinguish FMs from conventional food stores, include non-economic values like trust, social justice and health concerns. Apart from the support of “the local community and producers' profitability”, FMs' customers also value the diversity of (“seasonal, local, organic and unusual”) products and the atmosphere of FMs which allows them to enjoy just “dwelling at the market” (Murphy, 2011, p. 594). That's why one could observe an apparent effort of socializing FMs. Particularly bigger urban FMs developed into social places for meetings with friends. It became normal that such big FMs also offer opportunities for sitting to enjoy a fresh drink and snack (Spilková et al., 2013). Simultaneously, stalls with food to go obviously became an integral part of bigger FMs both in Ireland and in Czechia. Any-

way, the original idea of FMs is based on selling fresh unprocessed food. Therefore there is not a clear attitude towards the fancy offer on FMs.

FMs are meant to offer primarily locally produced food which is unavailable in conventional shops. However, sellers of exotic and ethnic products became an integral part of both Irish and Czech FMs. In that way, some Czech FMs offer authentic Dutch cheese or seafood, while Irish FMs accommodate stalls with Czech cakes, Nepali dishes or Japanese sushi. Thus FMs' customers can nowadays select from a wide range of unusual products which are not local products by their nature even though they might have been produced locally. The effect of these trends on FMs is unclear. On one side, they instead of these trends enrich FMs, on the other side; they rather occupy space which was originally assigned for traditional local producers.

### **3.2 Problems of Czech FMs**

Apart from the general issues whose linkage to the FM principles is unsolved, some challenging issues associated with the post-communist context were identified in Czechia. Even though the first years of FMs development in Czechia meant a great success, Spilková and Perlín (2013, p. 226) identified four specific issues which are potentially problematic for the future of Czech FMs. The first one is the strong (1) “self-provisioning tradition in Czechia” which may reduce the potential interest of consumers in FMs. The home production is well-known among Czech people and it is widespread across the socioeconomic spectrum including well-off households (with a slightly lower proportion of engagement among the lowest income group – Jehlička and Smith, 2011 in Spilková and Perlín, 2013).

The second issue is represented by (2) the “food anxieties” which undermine the FM authenticity. These include cheating with the quality and origins of the goods on FMs (reselling products bought in bulks from wholesalers as local produce). The instances of reselling goods bought in bulks in food chains or big processors have been repeatedly revealed (Vaindl, 2013). Nevertheless, some of these “incidents” were rather misunderstandings or results of misinterpretations (Ekocentrum Šťovík, 2013). Anyway, the incidents received a lot of attention from Czech media which significantly affected the reputation of FMs by sowing the distrust in local produce among the public, hence undermining the authenticity of FMs.

The problems associated with the (3) “long term feasibility of FMs” is the third issue. It embraces the very limited offer of the Czech produce during the winter season, the limited number of farmers willing to become vendors, and their (sometimes) limited business and marketing skills (Syrovátková et al., 2014). Because of 40 years of communism when private entrepreneurship was almost eliminated there is also the worry that particularly older farmers find it easier to supply big processors within conventional food chains than to take the risk in an unknown competitive market environment (Syrovátková et al., 2014). The majority of the Czech agricultural sector is made by big companies which are not perceived as suitable vendors for FMs. All these issues are multiplied by the growing numbers of FMs and the competition between themselves (Syrovátková, under review). The organisers are al-

lowed to supplement their FMs by foreign products partially (according to the FMs Code); however, it goes against the “local” principles of FMs.

On the other hand, Czech FMs' customers perceive the Czech provenance of FMs products positively in the background of the influx of cheap poor quality products from abroad sold in food chains (e.g. the scandal with technical salt in Polish food products in 2012 – Štáštka, 2012). The desire to support small farmers and local/Czech economy is among the major motivations for shopping on FMs (Spilková et al., 2013). Thus the poor reputation of Czech conventional food networks contributes to the attractiveness of FMs offering quality goods with clearly verifiable origin. Therefore, the food quality and food safety concerns encourage Czechs to shop on FMs. In exchange for this guarantee people are willing to economically support small farmers and local tradesmen in general in spite of the extra expenses. However, the undermining of their authenticity and trustworthiness of the Czech FMs in terms of the production quality, traceability and verifiability of the Czech origin of the sold goods might have serious consequences for FM future in Czechia.

The last issue (4) refers to the problems with the cooperation of local government and its support for FMs. There is often a lack of willingness of local government in cooperation on the organisation of FMs. Apart from that, vendors criticise organisers (sometimes local councils) for the increasing rental fees without any investment in the infrastructure and marketing for FMs (Srovátková, under review). Therefore FMs face organisational obstacles and are threatened by the “only” business approach in their organisation.

## **4 METHODOLOGY**

This paper is primarily based on the study of the available information about FMs and a field research on Irish FMs (described below). The literature review on FMs worldwide was combined with the internet data which served as a source of up-to-date information about currently ongoing FMs. For deriving implications from Irish for Czech FMs, earlier studies were used as data sources on information about FMs in Czechia. Specifically the study of Spilková et al. (2013) informed about FMs during their initial boom in Prague in 2010-2011 as the study was based on 13 structured interviews with FMs' organisers and 424 questionnaires with their customers. Srovátková et al. (2014) reported to the supply side of FMs when examining the agricultural potential for FMs' production in Czechia by quantitative methods using official statistics on the Czech primary sector.

The research on Irish FMs was conducted on six different FMs in the West of Ireland. The field work was done during March and April 2013 and comprised of observations on the markets, interviews with 3 organisers (O1 – O3) and 19 vendors (V1 – V19). The main benefit of interviewing organisers and vendors is gaining insights of actors directly involved in the practice. An earlier study on FMs in Prague (Spilková et al., 2013) showed that there are many differences between FMs them-

selves (e.g. location (macro – size of municipality, and micro – central/peripheral location within a municipality), size (number of stalls), days of operation (weekdays, weekends affecting the customers' structure), range of offered goods, type of organiser (NGO, civic association, private/public organiser) or the performance of FMs). Therefore Irish FMs were selected with the emphasis on their diversity.

The field research included two big successful city markets with long tradition – Galway Farmers Market and The Milk Market in Limerick, two successful and well-organised village FMs – Moycullen Farmers Market and Kinvara Farmers Market, and two small FMs in a small town/village which are less successful due to different reasons – Loughrea Farmers Market suffers from the lack of interest from its organiser (local council) while Oranmore Farmers Market's very successful performance was interrupted by the economic recession. The interviewed organisers were from FMs in Limerick, Moycullen and Oranmore. It was not possible to approach the organisers of the remaining FMs included in the research. Therefore the information about those FMs was gained through observations and interviews with vendors. Vendors were interviewed randomly, both food and craft sellers were involved in the field research.

## **5 RESULTS: THE PRACTICE ON IRISH FMS**

### **5.1 Roots of FM popularity**

The bad reputation of the conventional food chains is the underlying factor of the success of FMs in Ireland. The general distrust for supermarkets motivated people to look for alternative ways how to obtain good quality and fresh food (V5, V8). People come to FMs for particular products which they cannot buy elsewhere (O2), and because they wish to support local economy (V5). The health concerns are considered to be the main motivations for shopping on FMs thanks to the growing awareness of the food-health relation (V5, V6). The popularity of FMs is also driven by the fashionable trend of cooking from good-quality raw products (V7). Apart from that, shopping on FMs brings extra benefits like the offer of loose vegetables/fruits (i.e. V6 – self-selection of particular pieces and choice of the quantity thanks to the offer of loose products). The factors standing behind FM emergence and the motivations for shopping on FMs provide valuable insights into the key advantages of FMs which attract customers. In order to encourage FM viability, these qualities need to be carefully maintained and further developed.

### **5.2 FMs and the economic recession**

FMs in Ireland are generally considered to be more expensive than conventional shops due to the bigger amount of handwork and quality ingredients used. Nevertheless there may be market to market variations and some goods are cheaper on FMs than in shops (O1). The premium-price orientation of FMs is evident when realizing



that many FMs actually appeared in the Celtic tiger time<sup>1</sup> (V1). The precondition for the successful existence of such “premium” FMs is the willingness and ability of their customers to pay higher prices for FMs' products. The high price level of FMs is, at best, demonstrated by the effect of the economic recession on Irish FMs. Both vendors (V2, V3) and organisers (O2) on Irish FMs pointed out to the severe effect of the recent economic recession on their business. The Irish experience of the FM decline during the economic recession serves as a warning against the premium-price orientation of FMs. Therefore FMs need to offer both premium and more average goods to accomplish the goal of the social equality and to secure themselves in the economically less favourable times.

The economic depression caused that Irish people have had less disposable income (V2). Since FMs are considered to be a kind of a “discretion spending” (O2), sellers on Irish FMs got under price pressure from retail chains attracting customers mainly by low prices. There is a general opinion that discount stores like Lidl or Aldi considerably benefited from the recession (V1). As a consequence, the price competition from the discounters weakened the prestige of FMs (O3). Yet, the price pressure could potentially have been reflected in the quality reduction. On the other hand, customers often do not want to understand the difference in the quality between products from stores and fresh and often hand-made products on FMs, and they are not willing to pay premium prices for FM products (V4). Nevertheless, there is not only the competition between FMs and conventional retailers but also between the many FMs themselves (V2). Although FMs are forced to compete for their customers more actively, there are people applying for becoming vendors every week according to the interviewed organisers. The findings demonstrate the complicated structure of the price competition connected with the FM sector driven by both customers and conventional retailers. Yet, the massive development of FMs increases the competition between themselves. Thus the FM management is ought to carefully balance different (price) pressures to maintain a stable patronage for FMs.

### **5.3 Fight for customers: conventionalisation of FMs**

FMs are, from their nature, retail premises thus they have to compete for customers' attention instead of interest. Accordingly, the task of both organisers and vendors is to systematically improve their offer and services to meet customers' expectations and build relations with their customers. For FMs, the right variety in stalls/goods is essential (O1). Namely, (1) the “duplication in stalls” increases the attraction of a FM even though vendors may perceive it as an undesirable competition. An organic vegetable stall is an integral part of each FM, anyway, (2) a stall with conventional vegetables is also a necessity. A key element of each Irish FM is (3) a fish stall. Although stalls with (4) “food-to-go” and exotic/non-local products do not fit into the principles of FMs, they generally attract customers to come to FMs despite the sometimes declared customers' conservativeness in terms of buying exotic or unusual goods (V4, V9, V10).

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<sup>1</sup> The economic boom occurred in Ireland at the turn of the 3rd millennium prior to the global economic crisis, which severely affected the country.

The organisers of FMs are aware of the need to compete for their customers because the performance of FMs depends on market principles. Nonetheless, the adaptation to the customers' demand might actually include compromising of the principles of FMs. Examples from Irish FMs take in selling imported food which cannot be sourced locally (e.g. fruits), exotic food produced locally by immigrants (e.g. Swiss bread, Japanese sushi, Dutch cheese, Czech cakes), imported speciality food (e.g. Dutch cheese or chocolate), food-to-go, entertainment facilities (e.g. live music) or an increased proportion of stalls with crafts. Such trend may be perceived as the conventionalisation of FMs which, in the background of the poor reputation of conventional food retailing, necessarily implies negative interpretations. On the contrary, the organisers' experience shows that conventionalisation improves the attractiveness of FMs which is strategic for their survival.

#### **5.4 The management of FMs: organisers' and vendors' reflections**

The following part comprises of the organisers' and vendors' reflections which bring interesting insights on their jobs. Organisers are specific actors in FMs' development who have a significant impact on them. In comparison with vendors, they have to see the market as a whole to be able to manage it effectively (O1). There is a consensus among Irish organisers (O1, O3) that the organisation of a market is easier if the market is run privately since there are more rules for markets run publicly (e.g. by local councils). The most challenging issue for Irish organisers (O1, O3) is dealing with vendors (e.g. complaints about the spot size for their stall, the location of their stall etc.). Vendors see themselves as competitors and it is difficult to explain them that a small concession from him/her can make a significant benefit for the whole market (O3). As organisers are responsible for running of the whole FM, their competence and close cooperation with vendors play a strategic role in the success of FMs. On the contrary, vendors with poor business skills can significantly profit from the good management of FMs and survive thanks to the inertia (O3).

Both vendors and organisers in Ireland agree that the start of a new stall is not easy. Vendors should be patient and keep their stall at least for a month to be established on a new FM (O1). On the other hand, someone (V8) believes that vendors should not pay the fee for their stall during the first year of their business. In contradiction to the faced difficulties, vendors realise the importance of building relationships with their customers (V6). They appreciate the constant direct feedback from customers because 'FM is like a touchstone', which helps vendors to improve their products and services (V13). Last but not least, FM is a testing environment for new products and helps vendors to promote their bespoke production (V1).

Vendors generally perceive their job as a difficult one. They have to work in the inconvenient times (holidays, feasts, baking at night ...) including the preparation (of their car and goods) for each market during night or very early in the morning (V2). Moreover, the weather (in Ireland in particular) is an extremely important factor for the everyday performance of FMs (V11, O1). One of the major problems is licensing – it is very difficult to obtain a vendor's license for some popular Irish FMs (V1,

V12). The logic of a farmer selling on FMs was also questioned because time spent on FMs means less time for farming (V6). Even though vendors face many difficulties, their job offers a lot of freedom in comparison with more conventional occupations (V9). The described reflections of organisers and vendors show some of the major obstacles they face and support the need for their close cooperation to overcome these problems.

## **6 DISCUSSION: WHAT CAN CZECH FMs LEARN FROM IRISH EXPERIENCE?**

Both in Ireland and in Czechia, the general distrust in conventional food chains is one of the main factors standing behind the success of FMs. Thus the roots of their popularity lie in the offer of quality, fresh, unprocessed produce of the local origin. However, hints breaking these principles and implying conventionalisation of FMs occurred both in Ireland and in Czechia (Spilková et al., 2013). The conducted study showed that conventionalisation of FMs, i.e. the introduction of practices not matching FM principles exactly, has become a major trend on FMs in different geographical settings. The massive expansion of the conventionalisation is well demonstrated by the interest which the issue receives from consumers and public institutions (e.g. the introduction of the FM code of good practice in Czechia and in Ireland, the attention devoted to the violation of the authenticity principles on FMs by Czech media).

One of the most discussed issues is the local origin of FM products. Due to the unclear definition of the local provenience, it is often used by sellers in a very flexible way (Ilbery and Maye, 2006; Syrovátková, under review). The research on Irish FMs brought the evidence of both selling a range of products not matching the local concept (locally produced exotic products, non-local food which cannot be sourced locally etc.) and the introduction of entertainment facilities (food-to-go, live music etc.). In the academic literature, there are both examples of the so-called conventionalisation of FMs in particular (Spilková and Perlín, 2013) and AFNs in general (e.g. farm shops in Czechia, which typically operate as middlemen reselling farmers' products not engaged in farming at all – Syrovátková, under review). These trends have rather received negative critique so far due to the concerns about adopting both positive and negative characteristics of conventional retail chains (Spilková and Perlín, 2013).

However, in the background of the tough competition in the food sector, the trend of conventionalisation can also be perceived as a factor improving the competitiveness of FMs, hence securing its sustainability. Selling non-local or exotic products helps to overcome the seasonality or the general lack of local produce. The more diverse offer, the more people come on FMs and the better prospects for FMs. Moreover, the social atmosphere of FMs supported by the entertainment facilities contributes to the revival of public spaces and helps to build the community which is

one of the aims of short food supply chains (Goodman, 2009). Popularisation of FMs among broader public can also act against the social exclusion of FMs.

In the context of conventionalisation, the Irish experience of the decline of FMs under the economic recession offers a valuable lesson. To prevent the threat of closing FMs in the less economically successful times, FMs should try to attract consumers of all socioeconomic groups. Thus they ought to offer both premium specialty food and more standard goods for reasonable prices which respect the FM principles (e.g. conventional vegetables from a local farmer). Such approach also supports the principles of AFNs emphasizing the social equality and justice. On the other hand, the threat of the FM authenticity loss cannot be underestimated as there are repeated instances going against FM principles (reselling goods bought in bulks from wholesalers on Czech FMs). Therefore the conventionalisation is a desirable direction of FM development if the FM principles are respected in a reasonable way with regards to the local context (i.e. availability of authentic FM instead of MF products from suitable farmers).

The reflections of Irish vendors bring valuable insights into the insecure nature of their job. With regards to the obstacles described by Irish vendors, the little interest of Czech small producers in becoming vendors (Syrovátková et al., 2014) is more understandable. Since a vendors' performance heavily depends on the management of FMs according to the conducted study, a close cooperation between vendors and organisers is essential. As FMs are meant to support small independent producers (Murphy, 2011), their interests can be met at best through their engagement in the management of FMs. Therefore the results support the idea that vendors should be involved in the decision-making about FMs (Syrovátková, under review). The findings correspond with the experience on Czech FMs (Spilková and Perlín, 2013), which shows that the separation of vendors from the management of FMs is among the major problems of the Czech FMs. Therefore the participation of vendors in the management of FMs in Czechia could mean a significant improvement of their status which could positively affect the performance of FMs themselves. Such arrangement could also help to prevent other threats related to FMs as the potential loss of their authenticity associated with the conventionalisation arouses big concerns among scholars.

## **7 CONCLUSION**

The aim of this study was to contribute to the understanding of the current trends on FMs with the emphasis on FM authenticity in Ireland and Czechia from a geographical perspective, and to derive lessons from the traditionally free-market context with a longer presence of FMs for a post-communist context, where FMs emerged only recently. The conventionalisation, i.e. selling non-local food, food-to-go, or the introduction of entertainment facilities, is an expanding trend on FMs in different geographical contexts and it has both positive and negative aspects. On one side, it arouses concerns about the adoption of the negative characteristics of con-

ventional food chains, thus the FM authenticity loss, on the other side; it increases the attractiveness of FMs, which is strategic for FM survival. The recently experienced decline of FMs under the pressure of the global economic recession in Ireland justifies the attempts for a permanent improvement of FM attractiveness and the calls for a more critical approach towards the social exclusivity of FMs. Thus there is a need to continuously improve the attractiveness of FMs and to emphasise the openness of FMs up to a broad range of socioeconomic spectrum to avoid the FM decline in the economically less favourable times. Of course, conflicts regarding the definition of FM principles might occur. In that perspective, a broader engagement of vendors in the FM management is desirable to reduce the risk of the authenticity loss deriving from the conventionalisation and to contribute to a more efficient accomplishment of goals ascribed to FMs. On the other hand, supportive local governments and educated consumers are also crucial. The conducted study also showed that the political and socioeconomic context must be taken into consideration as the traditions of food provisioning (both formal and informal), economic situation and conditions for the agricultural production geographically vary.

### Acknowledgments

*This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (project no. 404/12/0470: Geography of alternative food networks and sustainable consumption).*

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## Ohrožení autenticity farmářských trhů: poučení z Irska

### Shrnutí

Nedávné rozšíření farmářských trhů (FT) ze západní do střední a východní Evropy otevřelo prostor pro výzkum tohoto fenoménu v různých politických a socioekonomických kontextech. Příspěvek se zabývá všeobecnými i postkomunistickými trendy na FT souvisejícími s otázkou autenticity, které potenciálně ohrožují jejich budoucnost. Všeobecné trendy, které lze na FT v současnosti pozorovat, zahrnují sociální exkluzivitu a konvencionalizaci FT. FT jsou dlouhodobě obviňovány ze sociální exkluzivity kvůli vysokým cenám, které jsou důsledkem požadavku na autenticitu FT (kvalitní suroviny, vysoký podíl ruční práce ...). Tato praxe je však v rozporu s principy alternativních potravinových sítí, které si zakládají na rovném přístupu ke kvalitním potravinám. Ačkoliv jsou FT založeny na prodeji kvalitních místních potravin od malých producentů, často se objevují snahy zaujmout zákazníky způsoby, které těmto principům zcela neodpovídají. FT tak často lákají zákazníky pomocí nelokálních a exotických potravin, prodejem občerstvení a zábavními zařízeními. Faktory specifické pro postkomunistický kontext zahrnují především obavy vyvolané incidenty podkopávajícími autenticitu FT, obavy o dlouhodobou udržitelnost FT s ohledem na způsob jejich řízení a nevhodnou strukturu zemědělského sektoru. Cílem této studie je prozkoumat praktické uplatnění principů FT a současné trendy na FT na pozadí jejich autenticity na jedné straně, a zákaznické poptávky na straně druhé, a vyvodit doporučení pro FT v Česku, které představuje příklad postkomunistické země, kde se FT objevily nedávno, z případové studie v Irsku, tradiční tržní ekonomiky s delší tradicí FT. Příspěvek vychází z výzkumu provedeného na šesti FT v Irsku, jenž zahrnoval rozhovory se třemi organizátory a 19 stánkaři na FT a pozorování na zkoumaných FT. Závěrečná diskuse je založena na srovnání výsledků z Irska s českými FT. Jednou z hlavních příčin úspěchu FT je v Česku i Irsku všeobecná rostoucí nedůvěra v konvenční potravinové řetězce. Zřejmým trendem na FT je nicméně tzv. konvencionalizace (ústupky od principů FT). Ta na jedné straně vyvolává obavy z adaptace negativních aspektů konvenčních potravinových řetězců, tzn. ze ztráty autenticity FT, na druhé straně tento trend zvyšuje atraktivitu FT, která je pro jejich úspěšnou existenci zásadní. Zkušenost s nedávným úpadkem FT v Irsku pod tlakem globální ekonomické recese opravňuje snahy o neustálé zvyšování atraktivitu FT a argumentuje pro kritické uchopení sociální exkluzivity FT. Proto je třeba klást důraz na dostupnost FT širokému socioekonomickému spektru zákazníků, aby se FT vyvarovaly úpadku v ekonomicky méně příznivých časech. Podrobnější pohled na překážky popisované irskými stánkaři umožňuje lépe porozumět malému zájmu drobných českých producentů o dodávání na FT. Větší zapojení producentů do řízení a organizace FT by zajistilo důslednější naplňování cílů FT, které jsou s nimi spojovány, protože by přispělo ke zmenšení rizika ze ztráty autenticity FT vyvolané konvencionalizací. Na druhé straně jsou pro úspěšnost FT zásadní také vzdělání spotřebitelé a podpora místních samospráv. Při hodnocení schopnosti FT dosahovat jim připisovaných cílů je třeba brát v úvahu politický a socioekonomický kontext, protože tradice v obstarávání potravin (formální i neformální), ekonomická situace a podmínky pro zemědělskou výrobu se v geografické perspektivě liší.