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Doing Agroecology: democratic practice and social learning in civic food organizations

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Agroecology

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Abstract

Localization of food networks has been heralded as a way of creating a more just and sustainable food system. This study explores the potential of civic food networks to serve as sites for “really existing” food democracy, providing opportunities for participation and capacity building for democratic organization and learning about food and the food system. Through interviews with participants in a food cooperative and a Transition Towns initiative in the city of Oslo, analysed through a combination of participatory democratic theory and social learning theory, the study shows how civic food initiatives acts as a frame for new civic relationships, and as “practical experiments” in food democracy.

Keywords: Agroecology, civic food networks, participatory democracy, cooperatives, Transition Towns, deep democracy

Introduction

A vital part of agroecology is finding new, more holistic, ways of dealing with the food system. This means widening the enquiry from agriculture into ecology, and the wider impacts of agricultural practices on the environment around it. But it also means enquiry into the human world, studying how agricultural practices, ecology and society all come together to co-produce food. The definition of agroecology as “the ecology of food systems” (Francis et al., 2003) calls for enquiries into this complex assemblage of relationships and contradictions.

For example, localization and diversification is a topic in agroecological studies (Kloppenburger et al., 1996). Localization might be useful and even necessary in terms of feedback and sustainability (shorter transport, less "distortion" of consequences, nutrient recycling). If localization is wanted however, we need to think critically around it and what it entails, and a clear commitment to democratic and justice concerns. If shortening the distance to the growing of the food we eat makes ecological sense, can it also aid the struggle for a just and democratic society? Can a more localized

food system give people more agency over their food and their lives? Can participatory engagement by citizens in various associations and organizations in the food system lead to a systemic increase in democracy? Does it hold the potential to improve the capacities of individuals and groups to deal with the complex issues of sustainability facing society?

This thesis will seek to explore this issue through the investigation of two associations dealing with food and environmental issues. My main theoretical lens is that of participatory democracy and social learning. The following questions have guided the exploration and analysis of the thesis:

³⁵/₁₇ What opportunities do food initiatives offer for participatory-democratic decision making?

³⁵/₁₇ What kinds of knowledge is being reproduced in the initiatives?

Theory and background

Following the call of agroecology means expanding the enquiry of the food system into new areas, such as the city, and new concerns, such as power and ethics within the food system. A phenomenon, which includes all of these elements, is the urban food question (Morgan, 2015). A new interest and concern for urban food security has been sparked, as a result of the increasing awareness of the challenges of climate change, resource depletion, population growth, food safety, to name but a few. This concern has inspired action, and throughout cities in the First World, new

(and old) ways of growing and sourcing food has been appearing in increasing numbers. The growth of community supported agriculture, urban agriculture, local food networks, farmer's markets and food banks are examples of such recent developments in the cities. Together these actions have been labelled "Alternative food networks", AFNs for short (Wilson, 2013). The main characteristics for something defined as an AFN are short supply lines, an emphasis on the value of the local over the global, tradition and craft over mass-production and the social embeddedness of local markets.

Researchers investigating these developments have generally understood and theorized them in diverse ways ranging from urban food security to reactions or alternatives to corporate capitalist food production and consumption, and as an antithesis to globalization. Localization has been characterized by closer ties between people, community, "proximity" between growers and eaters leading to more socially and environmentally just practices that result in tighter feedback in the agro-system. While being a promising challenge to increasingly unaccountable and conglomerated agribusiness, both the term "AFN", and the initiatives it supposedly covers have come under critique and are becoming increasingly nuanced. Some examples of issues identified are the error of "local always equals better" as in more sustainable or just when localization can be a defensive and parochial marketing strategy or when AFN consist mainly of the white middle-class, showing reification of class and race divides rather than inclusion. As a result of this, attempts at altering the theory of AFNs have been made. Watts et al differs between network- or food-focused initiatives as examples of strong or weak alternativeness. Heinrichs alters localisation by imbuing it with a tension between defensiveness and diversity, the friction between "holding on to our way of eating" versus an appreciation of eating-particularities of other local areas. Wilson argues for moving away altogether from theorizing the alternative, arguing that studying what people do as "alternative" unwittingly strengthens a capitalist hegemony and instead suggests to study concrete initiatives as potential sites of non-capitalist behaviour, while trying to avoid pre-assumptions.

In this thesis, the point is to not see local as essentially good, but rather as a scale that might offer new possibilities for a more just and democratic food system, and then to ask how such possibilities are performed in practice. Following this call, my aim is to study local food initiatives in the urban setting of Oslo, but instead of defining them as alternative beforehand, I instead approach the local as a scale which carries a potential for food democracy, proximity, tighter feedback, face-to-face meetings and greater participation for citizens in an important sphere of the city (food policy). Thus, my focus is to examine how local institutions can be places where people are learning by

doing democracy and "food" (growing, eating, organizing, deciding, changing).

This potential is supported in a recent article by Renting, Schermer, and Rossi, where the authors show how a new democratic potential has arisen due to the lack of belief in both planning and free markets (Renting et al., 2014). New food networks have risen out of civil society in response to the problems of the above. Examples are food coops, CSAs, urban gardening groups and others, blurring the line between producer and consumer, and creating new spaces for deliberation and a participatory democratic model for the food system.

An important characteristic of these initiatives is their potential to regenerate relational aspects of food, through the "re-appropriation of the social and recreational function of food" (Renting et al., 2014). In doing so, they create new "civic food practices", possibly letting people form meaningful relationships with each other and with food, for example through participation in urban gardening groups. In this sense, food issues carry a potential to act as common centres around which democratic activities may form.

Forming such centres of democracy can be referred to as deep democracy, a concept used by McIvor and Hale in their discussion of urban agriculture. From a deep democratic perspective, the classical liberal focus on citizens training civic skills is shifted to an emphasis on citizens forming civic relationships through participation in various democratic activities. This raises the stakes, implying that it is not enough with one-off participation in temporary projects, but instead, that if active democratic sensibilities are to flourish in our societies, citizens will have to "permanently" participate in specific meaningful activities relevant to their daily lives (McIvor and Hale, 2015).

Participatory democracy

To place the particularities of specific food initiatives in Oslo into a wider context, I will use a participatory democratic theory as a tool to assess to what degree democratic skill and ecological knowledge is reproduced, created or nurtured in citizen food initiatives. The concept of participatory democracy shares many similarities with deep democracy, yet predates it by several decades. In 1970, Carole Pateman published her seminal work "Participation and Democratic Theory". In it she made the claim, and supported it with empirical evidence, that the values of democracy: collaboration, tolerance and a commitment to general good of society, would only be widely held if they informed the daily lives of citizens (Pateman, 2000). She offered her participatory democratic theory as a counterpoint to the contemporary "realist" notion of

democracy, in which representative democracy was seen to function as a market, in which the masses use their votes to shop between competing elites. In the “realist” notion of democracy, the lack of participation in political life was seen as positive, due to the perceived incapability of the masses to positively contribute to the governance of society (Pateman, 2000). To counter this notion, Pateman used studies on democratically organized enterprises or practices within conventional businesses where workers were given a lot of control over their daily tasks, to show that participants in such practices were more interested in participating in national democracy, and felt a larger sense of agency in society at large (Pateman, 2000). This participatory understanding of democracy will prove vital in understanding the potential benefits of civil food networks, in generating new possibilities for progressive politics as well as for a future transformation of the food system in a more democratic direction.

After the 70s, interest turned away from participatory democracy for a long time, until recently when the question of democracy has been raised again, but now under the guise of deliberative democracy (Pateman, 2012). In a more recent article, Pateman herself discusses whether, with the rise of deliberative democracy, there is still a need for a participatory democratic theory. She argues that there is, and defends this claim with similar arguments to those used by McIvor and Hale (2015). Deliberative democracy portrays participation as one-off congregations of citizens into “mini-publics”, designed to be representative of the wider public but small enough to allow productive discussion. Such mini-publics then dissolve when the issue or project they were assembled to deal with is finished. However, this does not address the citizens’ experience of democracy outside of these mini-publics (Pateman, 2012). Pateman's critique is that this does not change the fundamentally authoritarian experience of participating in society. Going to work for eight hours a day in the hierarchy of a public or private bureaucracy does not give the experience of democracy, nor is it likely to foster democratic values. Hence, the opportunity for citizens to daily experience and practice democratic participation is still lacking, even if they occasionally get drafted into public forums. This is similar to McIvor and Hale's point that the civic skills needed, for example in the deliberation in a citizen jury, cannot be formed outside of or without everyday civic relationships formed through democratic relationships with other people, what they refer to as deep democracy (McIvor and Hale, 2015). They claim that urban agriculture initiatives bear the potential if not the guarantee, of such relationships. In a similar vein, though focusing on other parts of civic food networks, that potential is also the focus of this study.

Another perspective of this study's view on? participatory democracy comes from the work of

Chantal Mouffe. Key to her understanding of democracy is that it is constitutive. This means that the democratic process is part of creating the interests and positions that it negotiates (Mouffe, 2000). This is contrary to current liberal theory on democracy, which portrays it as an institutional framework or method where pre-determined interests are negotiated rationally (Mouffe, 2000). Nor is democracy viewed as a process of finding a final consensus, through rational argumentation or dialogue, something that characterizes deliberative democracy (Mouffe, 2000). Instead, democracy is understood as a flux; a process where individuals and groups discuss, clash, and deliberate, never reaching a final consensus or ultimate position, but instead adapting or changing. It is a way of making the world as we go along. This expands democracy from being understood as an institutional setup for governing a nation, or a rational method for reaching the right answer, to being a way of life, a way of creating "“open,”” continuous, “reflexive”” processes which bring together a broadly representative group of people to explore and discuss ways of changing their society"(DuPuis and Goodman, 2005).

To summarize, participatory democratic theory states that democracy is something that must be learned in everyday life (Pateman, 2000). A representative form of democracy is not enough, if the daily experience of its citizens (usually at work) is that of oligarchy or (more or less) unquestionable hierarchy. To participate meaningfully in democracy on a national level, the citizen must be a part of daily democratic relationships, at work or in some other setting, to acquire the skills and values of democracy (McIvor and Hale, 2015). Moreover, the constitutive understanding of democracy strengthens the importance of participatory democracy, as it moves democracy from being simply a method of compromise or distribution (among others) to being a more inclusive way of creating the fabric of society.

This understanding is important for a potentially more democratic food movement. Not only must new decisions be made, but the process of making those decisions must also be different. Making the idea of social, ecological and economic sustainability real is quite complicated, and the ways in which it could be done varies. Not only that, but in the process of finding the answer there will likely be conflicts of interests and opinions. A nascent food movement must thus find ways of collaborating while nurturing a diversity of approaches and opinions, without splintering into opposing factions. The best way of dealing with such complexity and uncertainty would be through a democratic process, on many different scales. On a local scale, the everyday participation in a democratic initiative would be an important formative experience for the persons who will need to do all of the above, where the skills of collaboration and democratic decision-making can be

acquired.

Social Learning

Given the emphasis on capacity-building in the participatory democratic theory, another vital part of a democratic framework for food organizations is how and what knowledge is reproduced or created within the organizations or spaces where the participation takes place. As stated above, one important potential benefit, or perhaps necessity, of participatory food democracy would be the ability to increase and develop the skills of both participating individuals and the group as a whole, thereby improving the efficacy of food networks over time and improving the democratic character of society in general. The capacities and skills in question in this thesis correspond to decision-making and knowledge about food and ecology. With this in mind, this study will analyse how learning is perceived in the two organizations, as well as give a theoretical interpretation of these events and statements and what they could mean for the wider cause of food democracy.

The theoretical framework necessary to understand and evaluate this learning potential is taken from the work on social learning. Though the meaning of social learning differs, this study draws its definition from Wals, who defines it as “learning that takes place when divergent interests, norms, values and constructions of reality meet in an environment that is conducive to learning” (Wals, 2009). To further sharpen the definition, social learning is divided into passive and active social learning (Glasser, 2007). Passive social learning relies on accessing the prior knowledge of others, such as expertise in books or on the internet, while active learning is built on “conscious interaction and communication between at least two living things” (Glasser, 2007). To use a food metaphor, it is a similar distinction to that between passively buying a tomato in a store or actively growing that tomato yourself. The act of growing engages the grower in a learning relationship with the plant, and if in the context of a group, in a social learning relationship. This is not to say that active and passive learning equals good and bad learning. The active learning process of growing a crop from scratch can be improved by elements of passive learning, for example in searching the internet for what the yellowing of leaves might mean.

Glasser differentiates between three levels of active learning: Hierarchical, Non-Hierarchical and Co-Learning. Hierarchical denotes the typical classroom relationship of teacher and students, Non-hierarchical denotes the sharing of expertise between experts-in-their-own-right such as that of a

trans-disciplinary research project, and finally Co-learning denotes an open-ended process of collaboration and learning between equals (Glasser, 2007).

For the questions underlying this study, Co-learning is the most relevant concept of the three. A constitutive approach to participatory democracy, as a process by which individuals and their relationships to each other and the material world are changed, implies a learning aspect. Glasser defines co-learning as follows:

“Co-learning supports change, positive change in particular, by building capacity in three fundamental areas: critical evaluation of existing knowledge and problems, knowledge generation and penetration, and application of this new knowledge to policy, practice, and everyday life” (Glasser, 2007)

This sounds quite similar to the hopes invested in a participatory democratic approach, by which political questions of justice, distribution, influence, and friction are managed through democratic means while simultaneously improving the participant’s capacity to deal with the unknown future.

Food democracy

So far a conceptual framework for participatory democracy as well as learning has been put forth. The final piece in the theoretical framework is that of food democracy, the underlying basis of the study of the food initiatives, and the link to agroecology.

Food democracy is a wide term, spanning from food security, such as the right to food of the Human Rights Charter, to food sovereignty, as in the more radical notion of the citizen’s right to control of the food supply (Renting et al., 2014). This study follows a strong definition of food democracy, given by Neva Hassanein, as follows:

Food democracy ideally means that all members of an agro-food system have equal and effective

opportunities for participation in shaping that system, as well as knowledge about the relevant alternative ways of designing and operating the system. Conceived of in this way, food democracy is a method for making choices when values and interests come into conflict and when the consequences of decisions are uncertain (Hassanein, 2003).

Hassanein has also defined a series of criteria as a concise definition of food democracy, which has served throughout this study as guide and framework for the empirical exploration. The criteria are as follows:

1. Becoming knowledgeable about food and food system
 - a. “food democracy means that citizens have broad knowledge of the food system and its various facets” (Hassanein, 2008)
 - b. The learning part, access to and the capacity to develop insight and understanding of the food system.
2. Sharing ideas about the food system with others
 - a. “Ongoing discussion and deliberation enables citizens to clarify issues and discuss values” (Hassanein, 2008)
 - b. The constitutive aspect of food democracy, an ongoing discussion about what is and what should be. Food politics.
3. Developing efficacy with respect to food and the food system
 - a. “Public work ... consists of an observable effort by a mix of people who produce things for the common good and who gain greater confidence in their capacities in the process” (Hassanein, 2008).
 - b. A shift from “passive consumption” to active participation in dealing with food and concerns around food. An emphasis on active participation and learning, working for a collective, and not strictly individual, good.
4. Acquiring an orientation towards the community good (Hassanein, 2008).
 - a. “A strong democracy involves citizens caring about the public good ... food democracy involves caring about both the human and non-human communities of place we inhabit” (Hassanein, 2008).

- b. According to Pateman, and McIvor, the values of “strong democracy” are cultivated through the democratic process and the active participation in meaningful activities related to one's life and society.

In the context of food democracy, this might mean creating spaces where people can participate and actively influence their own supply of food, while having access to the information and learning needed to make good and informed decisions. Exactly how this should look is itself an open question, best explored through active experimentation. Nonetheless, a combination of theoretical perspectives: Glasser's concept of active learning (with an emphasis on co-learning), Pateman's participatory democratic theory, Mouffe's constitutive understanding of democracy and Hassanein's criteria for food democracy, together form a framework for studying food initiatives as potential sites of social learning and food democracy.

Methodology

The enquiry was carried out according to a qualitative framework, consisting of semi-structured interviews, supported by observations. The qualitative approach was chosen due to the complexity of the phenomenon in question. The complex assemblage of social relations, cultural traditions, values, and hopes, commonly referred to as “democracy”, evades any simple definition into a static set of qualities, easily tested or measured. Instead, by undertaking a few but deep interviews with participants in the food initiatives, I have sought to build an understanding of their experiences relating to the themes I have chosen as the framework for my study. The conclusions of this study comes from my own critical interpretation of this understanding, with the theories related above as both tools and a link to the wider discussion on food democracy and participatory democracy. Theory has also served to limit the scope of the study: the initial shaping of research questions, the limits to the kinds of data sought, the methods used to collect the data, and finally, the interpretation of the experience into the final conclusion (Eneroth, 1984).

The Initiatives

This study is focused around two civil society organizations located in Oslo. One is a food cooperative, a voluntary association of people buying and distributing organic food to its members. The other is a local chapter of the Transition Towns network, an international network emphasizing local and practical action for dealing with environmental challenges. Together, these groups roughly correspond to some of the core characteristics identified throughout literature on new food networks: experiments with new social relations in between “field-and-fork, an ecological re-imagining of the city with emphasis on community and collaboration on a local scale, and local sourcing of food, and the use of city green zones as productive space (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), (Renting et al., 2003), (Kloppenburger et al., 1996).

Because I have been looking for new ways of organisation around food and ecology, I limited myself to initiatives placed in “civil society”, and also those claiming to be voluntary and democratically organized. I’ve avoided private or publicly owned companies or agencies, as they are very rarely organized around democratic principles, either legally or practically, and they are both subject to a wider range of rules and regulations, limiting the amount of experimentation they can engage in.

Table 1 shows the demographic composition of the participants in my study. They were not selected according to individual qualities but rather from their position in the initiatives.

Initiatives	Oslo Cooperative	Transition Sagene
Nr of Interviews	7	6
Male/Female	2 M / 5 F	1 M / 5 F
Norwegian/Foreign	6/1	4/2
Age range of Interviewees	25-40	25-40

Table 1. Characteristics of participants (interviewees)

Oslo Cooperative

The Oslo Cooperative is a “member-owned and members-run collaboration for direct sales of organically and biodynamically produced foodstuffs, with prices that benefit both the farmer and the members” (<http://kooperativet.no/om-o-k/organisasjonen/>). It is organized with a set of working groups dealing with specific tasks, divided up as follows: Communications, Orders, Logistics, Events and Meat & Dairy. There is also a board for taking decisions on wider questions, as well as a part-time employed coordinator for linking up the different parts of the cooperative and to serve as a link between the working groups and the board. Decision-making within the coop is organized according to a consensus model in the particular groups, with annual meetings to elect the board and to discuss larger questions affecting the whole cooperative. All members are divided into three “departments”, based on where the food is delivered for pick-up, two of these are run by the members of the coop and the third is based in Bærle, the Oslo Steiner School at Frogner, which manages its own distribution. Table 2 shows Oslo Cooperatives organizational structure, based on what I've been told in the interviews. The light blue background constitutes the general membership of the cooperative, while the coloured circles represent the coalescing of some of the members into specific working groups. The coordinator is rendered differently, to symbolize her unique role in the cooperative, and the supportive nature of her task.

At the moment, Oslo Cooperative has about 2000 members. Members pay an annual flat fee, which is used to pay for various expenditures, such as the coordinators salary. Each bag of produce costs NOK 200, all of which goes directly to the farmer. On top of this a 5% fee is added, which pays for the IT-infrastructure that the cooperative uses.

Transition Sagene

The second initiative is Transition Sagene, a local group of the Transition Towns network. Transition Towns is a network of local initiatives all over the world, working with practical environmental change, experimenting with new (and old) ways of living sustainably, and transitioning from the current fossil-fuel dependent society. In the literature on AFNs, Transition Towns have been exemplified both in a positive sense, experimenting and creating new imaginaries of sustainable societies (Sage, 2014), and in a negative sense, in some places de-politizing environmental issues by making them a local and defensive concern (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014). In

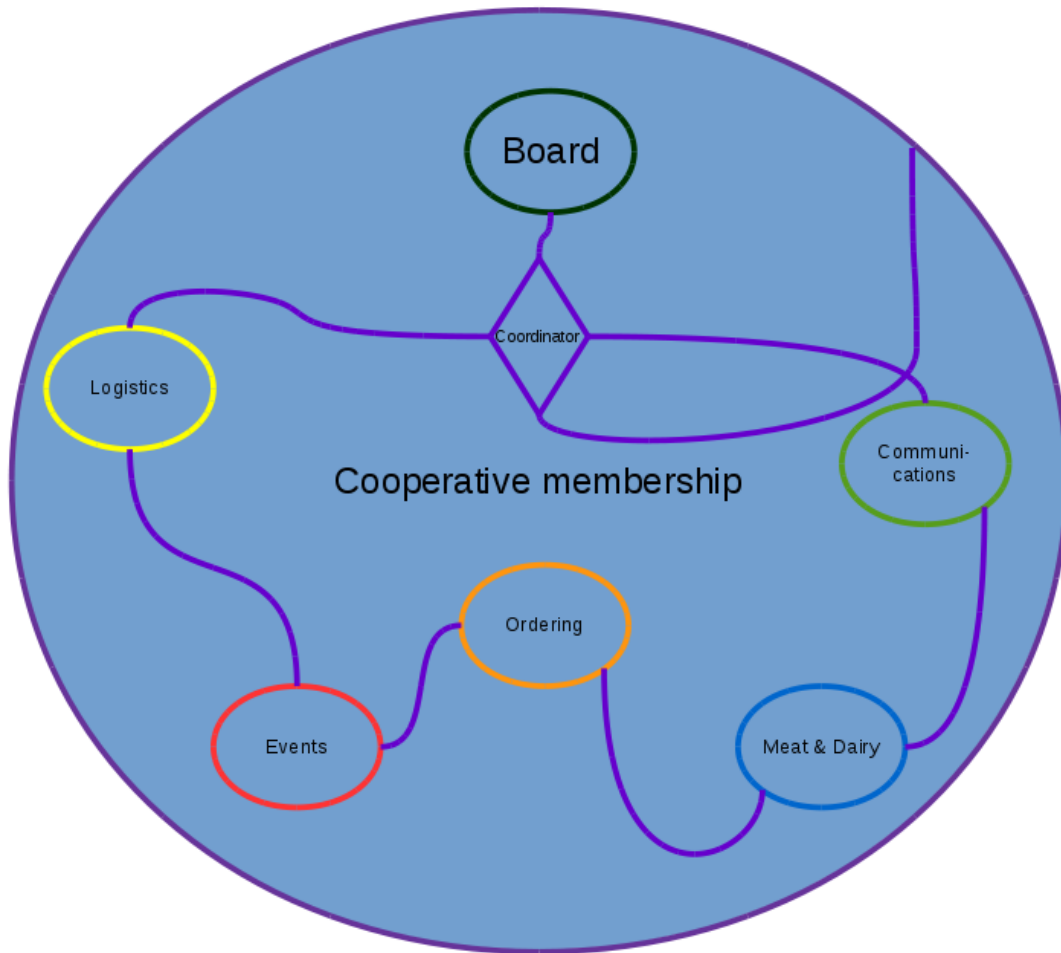


Table 2. Diagram of Cooperative

many ways it embodies both the dangers and possibilities of localization, both the defensive aspect of “minding one’s own house” and the potential of creating practical, tangible change around which to mobilize international action.

The local chapter was founded five years ago, and has been working since with making Sagene neighbourhood into a more sustainable place. In terms of organization, it is more ad hoc than the cooperative, lacking a formal structure and dealing with a far wider range of activities, not only dealing with food, in line with the philosophy behind the TT-Network. It is similarly divided as Oslo Cooperative, with working groups congregating around specific tasks, and a central informal board, called the “facilitation-group”, which acts as support for the different work groups. The activities and structure of Transition Sagene is far more malleable than Oslo Cooperative, with working groups congregating around specific issues, and dissolving when that issue has been settled, the project completed, or when active participants gain other tasks or interest lapses. Most of the activities taken on by the initiative are in the nature of temporary projects. There is no formal membership, so the number of active participants was not as clear as in Oslo Cooperative (which has a membership-fee). The number of active members and degree of formalization of the organizational structure had also fluctuated over time, as reported by the participants who had been with them from the start. I was told that the current membership consisted mainly of 25-40 year olds, most of them with a higher level of education, and many not born in Norway.

In addition to conducting interviews, I did participatory observation while taking part in setting up a seed library connected to Transition Sagene. By being a part of a concrete process, it was possible to gain a good understanding of the work process in the initiative. In a more general sense, the task of setting up a seed library, the first one in Oslo, offers a unique set of challenges relevant to the questions posed in my study. The process of seed selection and propagation is controversial, being a locus for GMO-debates, the “commercialization of life” through, for example, the outlawing in many countries of seed sharing and saving. Seed libraries carries a radical edge in that sense, seeking to provide a ready source of local seeds to local gardeners, but runs into a series of interesting problems to do with organization and the practical concern of how to preserve and improve the quality of local varieties over time. Seeing how these problems have been (or haven't been) tackled has given me a valuable insight both into the workings of Transition Sagene, and the more general question of the learning and effective potential of voluntary organizations.

The Interviews

The main method for collecting information has been semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured conversation is neither free nor controlled, but instead guided along the three themes of the thesis: democracy, learning and influence. The semi-structured form serves as a compromise between standardization and flexibility, keeping the questions open to allow for new information, but following the same guide as a standard for several interviews, to create comparable qualitative data (Bernard, 2006).

I met and interviewed seven people from the cooperative, and six members of Transition Sagene, selected to give several perspectives and a view as wide as possible of different experiences of participation. Each interview with all 13 participants followed roughly the same path and the interview guide mentioned above. The questions were open-ended, situated roughly within the two thematic areas: democracy and learning.

In Oslo Cooperative I interviewed the coordinator for each working group except one, who did not have time to meet me. I also met with a member of the board and the employed coordinator of the cooperative. I chose these participants because I wanted to talk to people who were active in the organization, and because I wanted to get insights from different parts of the cooperative. Some of them were newer members while others had been members since the start-up, thus providing another perspective.

In Transition Sagene, I followed a similar approach, but since the organization of this initiative is not as formalized as in Oslo Cooperative, I instead followed a more open-ended approach, asking each person I interviewed for a reference to another member they thought it could be useful for me to talk to. By following this approach, I met with six participants, from different parts of the initiative; all except one being a part of the central facilitation-group. Three of the respondents had been part of the initiative since the start, while the others had all joined within the last year, giving a different breadth of experience than among the participants from Oslo Cooperative.

I transcribed, coded, and organized the interviews according to a set of criteria borrowed from Hassanein, (2008), described above under the definition of participatory democracy. I coded the transcribed interviews with help of the LibreOffice suite, and finally structured them in a database for easy access and oversight. A grounded-theory approach was used to build the database; starting with a basic codification of relevant quotes from interviews, and then organizing said quotes under themes. However, instead of distilling new theoretical concepts from the thematic codes, these were

instead grouped under the democratic criteria borrowed from Hassanein (2008). The aim of this approach was to distil from the transcribed text all statements and claims that fell within the frames of the criteria, either supporting or challenging or altering them. This was not done to prove or falsify a particular theory of participatory food democracy, but rather to impose a specific framework of interpretation on the narratives of the respondents, that of “democracy-as-learning”. The following discussion is thus not an argument for a specific “true” understanding of participatory democracy. Instead, it is an attempt at deepening and adding to the general discussion of food systems, participatory democracy, and social learning through the combination of general theory and other case studies, with the stories of practitioners in the local setting of the Oslo civic food network. It is an attempt at building another connection between the greater societal learning processes of scientific enquiry, with the more local social learning of food network practitioners.

All quotes from the participants in the study below were translated from Norwegian to English by me. The names listed are not real, but were added by me. For an example of how an interview was coded, as well as the interview guide used in the interviews, see the appendices.

Results and Discussion

Chapter 1: Food Democracy

As noted above, democracy is a wide concept which can mean many different things. This study is mainly interested in democracy as a participatory process, an inclusive way of ordering everyday processes of decision-making, and as a constitutive process, a specific way of collectively learning and forming opinions and values around certain topics, in this case food and environmental issues.

Participatory decision making

All the participants in my study answered affirmative to the question of whether they felt their initiative was democratic. They differed however in how they defined what they meant by democratic, and the following part will try exemplify and analyse their discussion around democracy.

Respondents from both the Oslo Cooperative and Transition Sagene placed the main emphasis on the agency of members, their ability to participate in existing working groups and actively influence the direction of the organization, or the freedom to carry out new projects or ideas. Both initiatives delegate all practical tasks to autonomous working groups, who are free to find their own way of organizing how those tasks are to be accomplished, and to some extent what they are to be in the first place. Neither Oslo Cooperative nor Transition Sagene have any formal limitations to joining any of these groups, such as access to specific skills or having been a member a certain time. This was emphasized by the participants/interviewees as a key ingredient in their approach to democracy. Of course, there are practical limitations to this kind of participation, especially in Oslo Cooperative, where the set of “necessary” tasks are limited. In the case of Transition Sagene, the ability to freely develop an idea seemed a bit more possible given that Transitioning is a wider concept than a food cooperative. Aside from the differences in the underlying agenda, scale also played a large role. The participants from Transition Sagene put a stronger emphasis on the open-ended nature of the initiative's agenda as well as the beneficial relationships developed through participation, such as friendship. Participants from Oslo Cooperative placed a stronger emphasis on more formal aspects of democracy, such as the importance of clear guidelines for different parts of the organization and the importance of coordination. These similarities and differences will be explored in greater detail below.

Oslo Cooperative

Most of the cooperative's participants mentioned in one way or another the importance of the formal aspect of democracy, and the transparency of a relatively big organization. The following statement from the coordinator of the communications-group gives an example of this, when asked to expand on why she felt the cooperative was democratic:

“That's actually a thing that is very important for me, when I was about to join, the cooperative element of the cooperative. For me that means that one has those formal functions in place, that we have annual meetings, that we have a board that's elected, that we get minutes from the meetings, that one has the ability to make suggestions, that one can run for election, that kind of things. And it's my experience that the cooperative has this; that there is an elected board that makes decisions on a daily basis, in the everyday running of the cooperative, but that big decisions in a way is left to the annual meeting and the members.” (Lisa, Working group coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

Several of the respondents noted the difficulties and frictions inherent in organizing such a large endeavour on an unpaid and voluntary basis, especially in terms of creating clarity and commitment while retaining the ambition of flat structure and decentralization of decision-making and agenda-setting power. The following quote comes from a member of the board, in response to a question about how decisions are made.

“We are pretty good at that, the board, to not take on certain tasks, or at least not be the only ones who take decisions, we give the mandates down to the working groups, if the working groups are wondering what to do. For example, leftover-bags have been a challenge, what to do with leftovers [produce not picked up at deliveries], so we give the logistics-group a mandate to find the solution to this, and to decide, based on what they think is best, because we think they have the best solution, or the best understanding for what that solution should be. But at the same time it's a bit, we are very... a lot of the time new ideas come down from the board, the Cooperative Academy for example came from the board, the meat and dairy group came from the board, the biggest decisions and new departments comes from the board. I hope that it doesn't become a culture, or we have a wish that that culture doesn't arise, where the board does everything, but that one really used the whole cooperative” (John, Board member, Oslo Cooperative)

This quote corroborates the understanding of the role of the board and the decision-making structure of the cooperative with that of the communication-group member, Lisa, above. It also expresses a concern and worry about the role of the board, related to a friction between formalization and the agency of individual members or groups and the commitment to a flat structure. These tensions between freedom and coherence are not found only in democratic organizations, and management theory has dealt extensively with the problem, so much so that one management writer paints the general history of post-war “management theory truth” as an ongoing oscillation between top-down management and ad-hoc organizing (Forslund, 2013). In management theory, however, the issue is more couched in terms of stability and growth versus innovation and adaptability. The form is then portrayed as a means to an end, and the underlying power structure of the corporation or enterprise is never questioned. The interesting thing here is that very few of the management theorists have entertained the notion of a democratically organized enterprise, where these discussions at least have a potential of appearing in the open without being seen as a threat to institutionalized power structures, and so might be managed over time as a political process rather than a managerial.

One of the ways the cooperative had dealt with this was to hire a coordinator. She was tasked with coordinating between the different parts of the cooperative. When asked to describe why she felt the

cooperative was democratic she said:

“It is democratic because we take it seriously, it's owned by the members, all the members, and that means that if a member comes with a suggestion or feedback it has to be taken up, and it's open for anyone to be part of a working group, if they want to. As I said we don't make demands for any kind of knowledge, and because the members of the working groups, individual members who are doing something for the cooperative, have a very large degree of freedom in what they do and how they do it. We also talk about how it's not one person or one group that represents the cooperative; we feel that anyone who wants to may represent the cooperative. In practice it's often members of the board who take part in public debates, write the guidelines and that kind of things, but that's maybe just because they know a lot, they have oversight and they are available, but we encourage people to participate” (Kristiane, Cooperative Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative).

Kristiane emphasizes the agency of members and groups, as well as the responsibility of herself and the board (and supposedly other central members) to carry forth feedback from other members. She also points to the strong role of the board in overall decision-making. To some degree her own work seems to be to mediate between different working groups and to assist them in planning and carrying through decisions without involving the board. The following account from the coordinator both exemplifies a decision-making process and a friction between interests in resolving a task, as well as a describes her own way of working.

“Let me give you an example; a farmer said 'I need to know 16 days before' [about orders from the cooperative], and we are here to support the farmers, that's very important to us, so we have to adapt. While the meat and dairy group said: “We want to do this!”. But that has pretty large consequences practically and systematically, with regards to communication, it becomes a bit confusing, and someone in the communications groups said: “Okay, but we need a deadline for this, we said “Okay, we'll take it to the board-meeting” and the board will discuss it, and then the decision made was “No, we won't do it”. But that was an example of that it had been a lot discussion in the meat and dairy group, and I don't think they had been completely in consensus, they hadn't finished discussing it before they brought it to the communication group, and then the communication group said “Okay, but what about this?”, and so there ended up being a lot emails back and forth, so we found out that its best that “If you guys want to do something new”, then the groups have to discuss it, reach a consensus, make a decision in the groups and say “We want this!”, and then we'll take it to the board and say “Here's the motivation for this, what do you think?”. Now meat and dairy has come back to me and said that “I want to try again, we still think that we are going to lose this farmer if we can't make this work, and that's really bad, so we'll do another round of this”. We also get some feedback on what kind of things need to be taken to the board and what can we do on our own, and to return to what I said about there being

a lot of freedom, and there is, but then something happens which... a problem appears *and* suddenly it's like "Oh, we should have thought of that". Due to this issue of ordering deadlines, meat and dairy has asked for a bit clearer mandate "How much freedom do we really have?", *and that's a bit hard to say really, because not everything should go to the board ... and that's also* a part of my job to, how much should I take up in the board and how much should I just... Not that I should make the decision, but that I should say "Sure, that's fine, go ahead" or I can say "Okay, *just check with that person* first, because he knows how the web page works, and if that's okay, go ahead". (*Kristiane, Cooperative Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative*)

As she expresses, the daily running and development of Oslo Cooperative gives rise to various frictions that needs to be resolved or managed in various ways. Questions of delivery deadlines leads to questions of mandate, and so on. The boundary work implied in her description above is a political process without final answers. In a sense, the very act of developing the cooperative, for example by adding new functions like the meat and dairy group, also becomes a political process of defining what the cooperative is or should be. The role of the coordinator here seems similar to that of a facilitator in a contentious public issue, keeping an overview of different positions, representing them to each other and reminding the participants of the whole. The quote exemplifies her role in the development of the cooperative over time, and in how it deals with the tensions between decentralization and control.

To summarize, the central members seem to have strong commitment to democratic participation and flat structures, something that they themselves admit is limited by the practical concerns of coordinating the actions of large numbers of individuals as well as distinct working groups with their own tasks and agendas. A central decision to deal with is the hiring of the coordinator, who both functions specifically as coordinator, conveying information around the cooperative, but also seems to have a role as a kind of democratic facilitator, reminding working groups of the potential impact of their decisions on the whole and representing their concerns to the board as well as bringing forth the concerns of individual members. This role will be discussed further below, after an overview of Transition Sagene's form of democracy.

Transition Sagene

In contrast to Oslo Cooperative, the members I talked to in Transition Sagene did not mention the “formal” structure as key part of why they felt the initiative was democratic. The respondents in Transition Sagene did not seem as concerned with the overall coherence of different tasks, certainly due to its smaller scale (each working group being represented in the facilitation-group and facilitation-group members participating in several work-groups at once). Transition Sagene does not have a similar formal structure as that of the cooperative, and working groups appear and disappear depending on willing participants or need. The fact that it has a more open-ended agenda than the cooperative (community development rather than food deliveries) likely also plays a part, meaning that there is less need for congruence in its various activities.

One of the founding members, defines the nature of the initiative in the following way, as a response to the question of “Why do you feel the initiative is democratic?”:

“It's that it's low-threshold, it's up to the members to shape the group, what takes place, everyone can start a new project. What has been a bit challenging is that there are many that want to start things, but who perhaps aren't as keen on doing the job themselves. So we have tried to get people from the facilitation-group to be a bit supportive and to help, the way I've tried to be a kind of course-facilitator to help people hold their first course. Transition Sagene is run by the people who are in it, there is no one sitting somewhere and deciding what transition should be about, we define it. Of course, those of us in the facilitation group has more influence than people who just come to the Transition-Cafe's, but at least we give strong expression to our wish that everyone should participate in the group either way. But I can see that if people don't know how we work, they might think that it's us in the facilitation group who are in charge since it's not so very transparent. We are trying to convey it, but we can probably do that better” (Anja, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

This summarizes the specific format of democracy in Transition Sagene. There is an emphasis on agency, on the opportunity to take an idea and go with it. Commitment and active participation is challenging to create, but the group seeks to solve or improve this through a facilitation-approach, whereby more experienced members give advice and support to newer ones. Similar to the cooperative, there is an ideal of a “flat structure” but the reality is a bit more hierarchical. The informal structure is part of the open-ended approach, but might make it difficult for new members to understand the social structure of the organization.

As for the difference between formal and informal structure, one of the interviewed participants was

also active as a politician in the local council of Sagene, and could contrast the two different forms of democracy that she experienced in the council contra Transition Sagene:

“It’s a pretty big difference, even though I am at the local level which is a bit less formal than the national one. But one has a lot more structure, because one is a lot more responsible. Especially as publicly elected, I am responsible to all the people who voted me in, so to take decisions then has to be a lot more transparent, every decision I make have to be anchored at the local level. It’s far more formal... but that is also democratic. Not necessarily more democratic, but due to the fact that one has a system that everybody knows might make it easier to understand it, in contrast to Transition Sagene where everything is a lot more chaotic” (Anja, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

The formal democracy is a lot more rigid, and all decisions have to be “firmly anchored” in the local constituency. She emphasized her increased “responsibility to all who voted for me”. Transition Sagene was “a lot more chaotic”, in comparison. This lack of clarity would at times create confusion about who is in charge, or rather that the ideal is that everyone should be free to act on an idea, something she emphasized that the facilitation-group was actively trying to counter-act, but could probably do better. She did not describe the formal democratic process as more democratic however. The freedom to act was higher in Transition Sagene, and especially the threshold to participation was a lot lower. She described Transition Sagene as an “experiment”, of “new ways of working locally”. This might hint at the most important difference between the formal democracy of local level politics, or national for that matter, and the “experimental democracy” of initiatives like Transition Sagene. To say in a political campaign that one wishes “to experiment” is usually a fool-proof way of losing that election. The stakes are high, and a great degree of accountability is demanded from politicians (as Anja alludes to in the above quote of being responsible to voters). In a sense, the politician must know (or perhaps give the impression of knowing) both what is to be done and what the effects of such doing will be. In contrast, the participatory democratic form of Transition Sagene, though somewhat chaotic and not as clear (and surely not as accountable), offers far wider scope to try out ideas without the incurrent costs of potential failure. Here, what is to be done and its effects are unknown, the only commitment being to the democratic process and the freedom to participate. This description captures the sense of democracy-as-” experimental politics”, a process of finding out and learning through action (Hassanein, 2003).

Similar to Oslo Cooperative, there was an emphasis on support and facilitation when members spoke about the facilitation-groups role. It acts as a supporting structure to the different working groups and as the “core” of the otherwise quite fluid Transition Sagene. Three of the respondents, who had been a part from the start, noted that they previously had a more formal structure, but that a lot of time had been spent working with engagement and creating commitment. Instead, they had switched to waiting for and then supporting individuals who have the will, time and energy to commit to a specific project. For example, one of the founding members I interviewed pointed to the problem that “although a lot of people are eager to start something, not everyone is as eager to do the work themselves”. To work with this the older members of the facilitation-group would try to act as mentors to newer ones. In her case, being one of the founders and having held a lot of courses, she would help new members hold their first course. Expectations of commitment were also higher in the facilitation-group as the following quote shows.

“When you are a part of the facilitation-group, we know that you are a part of the facilitation-group. And you have to come to the meetings ... we set all the meeting-dates half a year in advance so that we know everyone can make it. And we expect you to be active when you are a part of the group. We expect things from each other” (Marie, Founding Member, Transition Sagene)

Analysis

The overall view expressed by the respondents on the importance of agency seems congruent with the emphasis on the freedom to self-organize and learn in participatory democratic theory (Pateman, 2000). For individual participants to generate self-direction and capacity, they must have the chance to coordinate and work together on concrete problems. Respondents from both groups also described central parts or roles in the initiatives as facilitatory, for example the coordinator in Oslo Cooperative and the central “board” of Transition Sagene; the facilitation-group.

It seems interesting frictions appear when the work of small groups is to be coordinated into a bigger effect beyond what is possible for any one individual to comprehend in its entirety. For example, one of the respondents in the cooperative noted that her working group often felt the need to clarify their work with the board, and when asked why, responded that “we are aware that we are a part of a bigger organization, but since we don't have a lot of contact with the other groups it feels uncomfortable to act in a way that influences the whole cooperative” (Lisa). In general, the two

groups dealt with this issue in their own distinct ways. Transition Sagene, whose central members previously used a lot of energy on coordination and motivation, had relaxed into “letting it go where it needs to go”, waiting for those with the energy to start projects and being ready to support them in doing so. In contrast, Oslo Cooperative had chosen a more formal approach (again, perhaps owing to its scale and more concrete mission), exemplified by the start of a “Cooperative Academy” and the employment of a part-time coordinator. I was told the Academy was still on the drawing board and so it can only serve as an example of the overall approach to creating coherence. The coordinator on the other hand, which has been working for a while, was reported as having “helped enormously” in generating a feeling of pulling in the same direction. She worked as a facilitator, enabling and hosting the ongoing work of the whole cooperative. In an example, the coordinator herself emphasized the importance of members’ ability to autonomously experiment with new ideas, while describing her role in that regards as sometimes “braking a little” and asking the question “what consequences will this have for the work of the other groups?”. Another respondent described her as the “mom” of the cooperative, who “takes care of us”. As mentioned above, in Transition Sagene they also talked about the role of the central group or the older members as facilitatory, providing help and perhaps pushing a bit to get those with new ideas started on new projects.

This emphasis on facilitation is quite interesting. It marks a step away from more authoritarian command-and-control concerns to a more open-ended supportive guidance. If local, participatory food-democracy is understood as a social learning process, a collective and experimental finding out, or in the words of DuPuis & Goodman (2005) an “‘open’, continuous, ‘reflexive’ processes which bring together a broadly representative group of people to explore and discuss ways of changing their society” (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005) then a supportive approach is more apt than top-down leadership approach. This is also congruent with Mouffe's (Mouffe, 2000) wider discussion on democracy as constitutive: an open, messy, non-foundational process in which individuals and positions are made, not simply mediated. If democratic procedures are to be a process of becoming, while still being a functional coordination of action into result, adopting a “permanent” facilitator of that process can act as a (somewhat) neutral safeguard of equality and access of all participants, as well as a form of organizational prosthesis for the lack of a clear decision-making hierarchy.

A facilitating approach might be a useful tool in dealing with the problems of working together. Both of the organizations were firmly committed to flat structures, but many of the respondents

noted the difficulties in putting the normative belief in a flat structure and equality of participatory access into practice. To summarize, there seemed to be tensions between these normative ambitions and the more practical concerns of initiatives. This leads on to the next step of the analysis, regarding the practical outcomes of the work of the initiatives, what their collaboration led to.

Developing efficacy with regards to food and the food system

” Efficacy means that an individual has the capacity to determine and produce desired results. Rather than remaining passive consumers, food democracy involves citizens being able to determine their own relationship to food and public work by citizens to address and solve community food problems. Public work ... consists of an observable effort by a mix of people who produce things for the common good and who gain greater confidence in their capacities in the process.” (Hassanein, 2008)

” My experience is that it takes quite a lot, quite a lot of involvement to get everyone feeling that they are a part, that they know what to do and that they are valued and that their opinions are heard at the same time as we have to find a consensus. It is a very, very interesting exercise, that I haven't dealt with before”. (Lisa, Working group coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

A vital part of experimenting with food democracy is trying to generate tangible effects (Hassanein, 2008). One of the main pillars of the Transition-networks “ideology” is the emphasis on working practically and creating small transitions on a local level, while Oslo Cooperative must succeed in moving food from farms to the city while integrating the balancing-act between the needs of growers and eaters. In a way, they are both practical experiments, in the sense of working with concrete issues such as food supply or urban gardening as opposed to awareness-raising or political lobbying. This is an important distinction. One way of imagining food democracy would be a society in which a vibrant and active civil society deliberates on questions of ecology and food, in a public sphere. Such public discussion then informs political and administrative elites which use it as guidance in regulating the food economy. This leaves the structures of the food system, and the learning opportunities within them, outside of direct democratic control. Following a participative idea of food democracy is to seek to expand on this by transforming the structures of the food system into democratic units, such as cooperatives or CSA's, or other forms of democratic associations yet to come. Following McIvor and Hale, such associations would form the basis for stable (not static) and persistent civic relationships that can host the reproduction of the civic skills

necessary to participate in the deliberations of the public sphere (McIvor and Hale, 2015). Since it would hardly be in the democratic spirit of such a proposal to lay out the theoretical blueprints of this society beforehand, we must instead seek to learn from those practical experiments around the world already engaging in these kinds of activities, and so seek to aggregate the local knowledge created there into a wider discussion.

There were differences between the initiatives in terms of what effect their work were presented as having. To sum up, the Cooperative can be viewed as an attempt at creating a participatory democratic enterprise, while Transition Sagene is an attempt at open-ended and participatory community development. The following chapter will go into this in greater detail.

Oslo Cooperative: “Being there for the farmers”

” I know that we are a support for farmers, that is the most important part of the coop in many ways, an important source of income for them” (Kristiane, Cooperative Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

When I asked about effects, respondents in Oslo Cooperative put “being there for the farmers” as a primary goal. Examples given were of economic character, such as providing the outlet for new on-farm enterprises in the form of a sausage-maker, or the buying up of “transition”-produce from a farmer switching to organic production. Others emphasized community-building and social networks and learning, such as farm trips and the help and social interaction inherent in those. Another set was of a more symbolic kind, such as being visually present at the 'Food Hall' in Oslo (one of the pickup-points for produce bags), or the various skills and insights learned by the members through their participation.

Oslo Cooperative: Supporting organic agriculture and farm enterprises

The Oslo Cooperative coordinator expressed the effect the cooperative has, and its impact on farms and organic agriculture in this way:

“We want to encourage more farmers to run their farms organically, and I have an example of, I mean all our products are Debio-certified, but there was a discussion with a farmer who wanted to grow Quinoa, and wanted to transition to organic agriculture but wanted to try it out and said 'I'll change that part to organic, but it takes time for it to become approved, if you want to buy what I produce there, then I can do it'. So there was a little discussion about that, but then we said yes, and we are not a hundred percent sure that it completely right, for our members, so we have to be very careful and communicate with them, and say that “this is not certified organic, but it correlates with our principals”. But that's a method that has had an effect, that he actually did it, and will try it out, and hopefully transition to organic on the whole farm, and that's the goal, for both him and for us. And he contacted us, so that means that we are known and that the farmers think 'Okay, here is an opportunity, this gives us an opportunity' and that's very good” (Kristiane, Cooperative Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

The Cooperative is portrayed as a kind of buffer, a possible sink or support for farmers wishing to transition to organic production but facing problems with regulations. The benefit here seems to lie in the possibility for less anonymous relations between the farmer and the person eating the produce. Certification, which is an attempt at conveying more information through the market (Sundkvist et al., 2005), is replaced with a more trust-based deal, in which the representatives of the cooperative agree to buy “non-organic” produce on the promise of future wider adoption of organic standards. The political nature of this economic task appears in the respondent noting that “they had to be very careful” in conveying the decision to the members. Supposedly, any member could challenge the decision and raise a discussion on what the standards and conduct of the cooperatives “organic” policy should be (though it did not happen in this instance).

The following passage portrays the economic relationship between Oslo Cooperative and one of the farms they deal with, portraying some of the challenges farmers face and emphasizes the importance of establishing relationships.

“Alm Østre sold, I think it was rutabagas, which they sold to Coop Norge AS, big Norwegian cooperative retailer (COOP), for a while. So they had a contract, which they felt it was very hard to relate to due to the quantity and demands that COOP poses. They have now stopped selling to ordinary shops completely, they sell to some small-colonials, there's not so many of those. And they have their own box-scheme that they deliver in Hamar, Lillehammer, even Gjøvik. But I think the largest part of their revenue comes from the Cooperative, and of course, it varies to but it's fairly stable. So for them it is very, very important, so of course it's very important that they have a good contact with us, and that the members are willing to go out there, it becomes this reciprocal thing. And it's the same thing for Bergsmyrne (another farm), but that's a smaller farm. But they have also become quite dependent on us, and we are dependent on them too. I think they are very happy for this setup, at least that is what I've heard” (Ingrid, Working-group Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

This shows how farmer benefits are perceived by the respondent, similar to the buffer-function described above in regards to non-certified organics. The relationship between the farm and Oslo Cooperative is presented as more mutual than what is the case with bigger or more rationalized buyers, such as COOP Norge AS.

One of the members of the meat and dairy group described as result a small start-up that one of the farms connected to the cooperative, Solli Gård, had started. This example had more of an economic character. According to the respondent the farmer had long been making sausages, but had lacked a sales-channel to expand, mostly selling through his own farm-shop. Seeing that the cooperative could place far larger orders than the occasional farm-shop customer, where every sale would be accompanied by “an hour of talk and gossip”, he was able to invest in a small “sausage-makery” and to employ a helper. The respondent described this as the cooperative providing an economic base that enabled farmers to take risks and innovate in ways that had not been possible before, increasing their flexibility. (Paul, Board Member, Oslo Cooperative)

Oslo Cooperative: Forming networks and commonality between farmers and members

Socially, the contract and interaction with supportive and interested visitors and customers might be very valuable for the farmers' sense of worth. Since no farmers were interviewed as part of this study this assumption is based on statements made by the interviewees from Oslo Cooperative. Nonetheless, the claims made by the cooperative interviewees signal two interesting benefits, one being the new social connections and relations developing between farmers and members as people, and the networking and mutually supporting effects for farmers of being connected to Oslo Cooperative.

The main interaction between "everyday" cooperative members and farmers seemed to be the farm trips. The point of these trips was in part to help farmers out with labour-intensive tasks such as weeding or picking potatoes. This was reportedly valued by farmers who had contacted Oslo Cooperative on their own initiative with regards to setting up these kinds of trips. The following lines is a description of one of these trips by the coordinator of the events-group.

"Yeah, for example the trip we had now in October, the first time it was actually the farmer who contacted me and now we've been there several times. They think it's a great help when we arrive; they have a lot of interns and that kind of thing. It's a pretty large farm. ... We take on sign-ups until there is enough of us, minimum 10 and maximum 20, otherwise there are too many people, for those on the farm as well because they cook for us. ... when we arrive at the farm the farmer runs the show and that usually works out fine. We have to be flexible about when people want to go back, it's always a hair-fine balance between... we are there to help the farmer, that's the main purpose, but all these city-people have a lot of fun, cause we get to the countryside, we think it's a bit romantic and fascinating and such, and of course the farmer thinks it's great that we show an interest, that these Oslo people want to come and visit... but it can't be like, we're there to enjoy ourselves, so people have to be allowed to go back when they feel like it." (Ingrid, Working-group coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

Perhaps the potential benefit of such trips should not be seen as strictly economic in the terms of access to free labour, but rather as trust- and relationship-building events creating ties of understanding between farmer and consumer. A St. Hans celebration (a Norwegian mid-summer holiday) given at one of the farms, where a trip was arranged with camping and dinner to the farm, and a celebration held together with the farmers on the farm is an example of this. Though this is not a straightforward economic effect, such as labour, it is nonetheless interesting in regards to the social aspect of the cooperative-farmer interaction. The cooperative recently held a meeting

together with all of its farmers for the first time. The board member I interviewed, John, described the isolation of some of the farmers in their district, and the opportunity they got to meet like-minded farmers in these meetings. Organic and biodynamic production is still a small part of the overall makeup of Norwegian agriculture, and providing such a platform for farmers has a very important effect. Since farming also is a social practice embedded in norms and institutions governing what is permissible and not, being the organic farmer in an otherwise conventional surrounding can be stressful. To be able to meet with other farmers who share the same beliefs and values, as well as getting the support from engaged urban citizens is good. Such positive relationships can support trust-building which is necessary for bigger changes in consumer-producer relations.

Another example of an effect that the cooperative is rather a part than the cause of, is the increasing benefit to farmers of the network of smaller businesses specializing in organic produce, such as restaurants and small shops. All these are examples of local food networks, dedicated to organic produce and low food-miles, which provides new opportunities for farmers. One of the respondents did note that she felt that the cooperative had “led the way” in some respects, whereby restaurants looking for organic and local produce would contact farmers through the cooperative, or that members of Oslo Cooperative would come in contact with and support small start-ups such as “Mølleren og Sylvia”, a new shop selling only organic foodstuffs locally sourced. This would then entail a positive network effect, where the cooperative plays a role in bringing new producers into an already existing network of people looking for organic produce (though it by no means is the only channel). A concrete example of these effects can be seen in the case of Alm Østre, described above, who stopped selling to Coop Norge AS on contract, in preference for the conditions in dealing with the smaller actors in this network.

The interviewee who gave me this example also claimed that this process was collaborative in nature, that different actors were “cheering each other on”, as examples of positive developments in the food system of Oslo. No doubt Oslo Cooperative, being the biggest actor in this “alternative” food network, had an important influence. The positive effect of this influence was nuanced a bit by another participant, who was worried that the cooperative was growing too big, that it might come to have a stifling effect on new developments in the Oslo food system by for example, out-competing other similar initiatives. He emphasized that this was not the case today, but that it was an important question that the cooperative would have to deal with in the future.

This concern relates to a similar discussion within rural development. In an interesting discussion on “Economic diversity”, an important part of the localization-argument (from a systems/socioeconomic-perspective), economic diversity instead of economies of scale can create greater stability in local economies. Farmers sell to baker sell to plumber sell to farmer (Helenius et al., 2007). Sadly, the benefits of these kinds of “diversified economies” are not empirically well studied (Helenius et al., 2007), and so the outcomes in this case are potential rather than actual. Given the more socialized economic relationship between farmers and the cooperative, present in discussions on prices, what to produce, willingness to buy transition-organics, and others., it could play a role in allowing for greater economic diversity in source-regions, at least for farmers. Oslo Cooperative provides a benefit for the "local" food network in Oslo, which in turn helps farmers sell their produce and gain more equitable negotiating terms than the ones they get from big buyers such as Coop Norway (ironically), as shown in the example of Alm Østre. This at least holds a potential for generating the multiplier effect as described by Helenius et al (2007), in which the farmers can diversify their sales-channels (in the food network) and negotiate and coordinate more actively (through the cooperative, which in turn might push things in "the democratic direction" in the Oslo food network in general). In addition, since the cooperative deals directly with consumers, value-adding activities (such as the sausage-production) might also be stimulated or made possible in source regions, thus contributing to the economic diversity there.

Another aspect of the same argument is the benefit of “closer feedback loops” (Sundkvist et al., 2005). This relates to problems and challenges at the site of production, such as environmental degradation due to chemical intensive agriculture, or social injustice due to terms of trade. The argument is that, though neither producer nor consumer is interested in such an outcome, the distance between them obscures the “feedback” that something is wrong. By decreasing the distance between the two ends of the food-system, this feedback might improve management (Sundkvist et al., 2005). The article posits certification schemes as examples of such feedback, which would serve as a conveyor of information to the consumer, allowing her to make better decisions (Sundkvist et al., 2005). This does not question the basic assumption of the market as the best conveyor of goods and information, but rather seeks to amend it slightly by adding an extra tag to the commodity, in addition to price. Oslo Cooperative seems to develop this even further, by creating spaces where farmer and consumer/grower and eater, can meet and deliberate on their common concerns. By collaborating and coordinating with farmers, the cooperative can take into account special factors that farmers need for making their production more ecologically sound, for example supporting a

farmer in the vulnerable transition-phase of a switch to organic production. An interesting question is where this should lead in the future, whether the cooperative should stay a consumer-organization which negotiates as a collective with 'outside' farmers, or if the farmers are to be increasingly integrated into the cooperative structure, thereby (possibly) transcending the consumer-producer duality, or at least making it more fluid.

If such closer relations are to be formed between farmers and consumers, the participatory democratic framework becomes a vital ingredient. Without a clear commitment and awareness of equal participation, justice and open discussions about questions of influence and distribution of burdens, such close social networks can have an exploitative dimension to them. For example, in a study of 54 CSAs in the United States, Galt has shown how CSA-schemes can lead to farmer self-exploitation due to the strong commitment they develop to their members. "Bringing home" environmental and social costs of farming to the farm, for example by not using mineral fertilizers, were in many cases not compensated by increased contributions from the CSA-members, but instead covered by the farmer working longer hours and postponing rewards. Though the farmers involved stated in interviews that money was not their chief motive for farming, that the possibility to farm and control their own food supply was its own reward, this poses important question for the sustainability of such CSAs (Galt, 2013). Oslo Cooperative, sharing a similar structure of members buying from farmers could potentially run into the same problems. Another related tension mentioned by a respondent was that of the price that different farmers set, depending on scale. Some farmers would charge less for, say, a rutabaga due to having bigger farms or more "efficient" production while others would charge a higher price with the argument that they provided other benefits. It is the cooperative's policy to accept the price the farmer demands at the moment, but this lead to tensions between different farms due to the fact that they are being payed different amounts of money for the "same" product, and will somehow need to be resolved, perhaps though discussion between farmers and members of Oslo Cooperative.

Such concerns over questions like remuneration and distribution, or various trade-offs in agriculture raises an interesting question. Could this be a way of internalizing tensions in production and distribution otherwise left over to markets? Things that are usually left to "neutral" markets to decide might in this way be "embedded" into a more political discussion within Oslo Cooperative. According to a market logic, all the staggering complexity in the food system is reduced to a quantitative denominator: price. This reduction and its problems was originally traced by Karl Polanyi, who claimed that, theoretically, a functioning market society must fully commodify the

factors of production: capital, land, labour and money. However, land and labour are the very stuff of life, land being the biosphere and labour constituting society. They cannot be turned into simple quantifiable variables without perverse effects (Polanyi, 1985). In the case of rutabaga-farmers, strict market logic demands that the cooperative buy the cheapest rutabagas, under the assumption that they were produced in the most efficient manner. Of course, this says nothing about whether the low price was accomplished by externalizing costs on to the surrounding ecosystem, or through exploitative labour practices. Under neoliberalism, such problems are “solved” by inventing new markets, such as various emissions-trading schemes (which has never managed to lower actual emissions) (Mirowski, 2013). A democratic discussion on these issues might be another way of re-embedding them into a political discussion, though no illusions should be held about the ease at which this is done.

Nonetheless, the process of attempting to do so offers vital learning opportunities for a participatory democratic framework. A tool, for thinking about the role of a possible farmer-consumer interface with Oslo Cooperative as platform, can be drawn from systems theory in the concept of a learning subsystem:

“In the learning subsystem, the same human beings are present as active actors and decision makers, as users of symbols and concepts. These decisions may be representations of social learning as a result of interactions between the actors within the subsystem ... this subsystem is the monitoring of the functioning of the biophysical system: the monitoring-management loop is the feedback mechanism between the learning subsystem and these two other subsystems. It implies decisions about the desired state of affairs” (Helenius et al., 2007)

A participatory democratic platform (say, in the form of a Cooperative) can be conceptualized as a *learning subsystem*, wherein political questions of distributive, environmental and social justice can be discussed in a way that *improves the system over time*. It would be a tentative model for dealing with feedback from the management of the biophysical system (agriculture), as Sundkvist above looks to accomplish using certification, as well as questions of distributive justice and remuneration for labour, and the social impact of the system as a whole on its various constituents.

Oslo Cooperative: Economic Autonomy

Another important characteristic of the cooperative is its relative economic autonomy. At the moment, Oslo Cooperative is independent from any external monetary funding, raising all of its cash through a member fee. This is not directly related to farmer benefits or participatory democracy, but is very important for the democratic and experimental qualities of the cooperative. One of the cooperative members, who was also employed by a Norwegian charity-organization emphasized this in her comparison between the two.

“I think the Cooperative is a lot more flexible, I mean it's super-idealistic but so is this organization. But, a huge difference is that the Cooperative is self-run, that it doesn't get any kind of external support from any kind of donor, or anything like that. This organization here gets a lot of support from donors ... which brings some obligations with it. Then you get a lot more rigid systems, but the Cooperative can do as it wants, as long as the members are on-board with it, and then you get a lot more opportunity for participation, as long as it is that way, as long as its our money” (Lisa, Working group Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

Funding comes with demands, something this member was acutely aware of. If the cooperative had received funding for “supporting sales of organic produce”, would it then be allowed to buy non-certified produce with the rationale that it might enable a farmer to change her whole farm to organic? Perhaps more importantly, would the board have felt free to make such a decision when it had to be made, or would they have to wait until the next funding application, for fear of being hit with economic sanctions, and then initiate a discussion with funders? If we take the case of non-certified produce, the board made the decision “with hesitation” due to concerns of what the reactions of the wider membership would be. This hesitance, and the following emphasis on legitimizing the decision in accordance with the statutes seems to be signs of democratic 'health', in that the board does not take its executive power as granted, strengthened by the fact that there are no external demands on the board's decision-making that might skew its delegated role as executive council. An even more interesting test for the democratic health of the Cooperative could have been if this decision had been challenged by parts of the membership, but “sadly”, this was not the case as far as I was told. To limit this result somewhat, it is important to remember that there are other kinds of “external funding”, especially in the case of the great amount of time and energy devoted to Oslo Cooperative by the active members, who are economically sustained by their participation in the wider economy outside the cooperative.

Transition Sagene: Experimental community development

“Generally the thing with Transition is that it's an experiment, of testing out new ways of working locally, we've had a lot of one-time projects while other things run over time ... we are very committed to growing, while other things are more ad-hoc, things that happen because someone in the group wants to do it. Also, I've met incredibly nice people, and gained a network ... So it's a typical place to meet like-minded people, as much as doing something useful and good, it's a place for meeting others with similar values to oneself.” (Anja, founding member, Transition Sagene)

In Transition Sagene, much emphasis was placed on “being present” in Sagene by playing a part in transforming the local setting in a “greener” direction, and generally re-imagining the urban space. One central example are the various open courses on foraging, showing the edible side of Oslo’s parks and green-spaces. Disseminating knowledge through courses and practical projects are perhaps the main platform that Transition Sagene used to reach out to people. For example, parallel to the period of this study, a seed library started in collaboration with a public library with connected courses on seed-saving and harvesting courses was also used to learn about topics of interest to the participants themselves, which in turn had led some of the members to start separate initiatives, such as Gruten, a small company focused on recycling coffee-grounds into various things such as vermicompost, and Sykkelkjøkkenet (The Bike Kitchen) an initiative focused on teaching bicycle-maintenance, for example letting people “adopt” a used bike after doing a course on bike-maintenance. Urban agriculture was also a part of the initiative, through collaboration with Geitmyra Organic Garden in Sagene, where members could get access to small plots of land to grow on.

Transition Sagene: Experimental and Open-ended organization

As related in the description of Transition Sagene's democratic form in the above chapter on participatory democracy, respondents from Transition Sagene defined their form of democracy mainly by emphasizing the open-ended agency offered through participation and the opportunity to develop any idea freely (supposedly as long as it falls within "green" or Transition Town values). Similarly, the history of the organization is described as a long string of experimental projects, some staying and some disappearing over time. One outcome of the democratic organization of Transition Sagene could be said to be the organizational form itself, which seems to have managed to stay together while changing quite a lot over time. For example, there were only three of the original members left in the organization, and a lot of the members were international short-term residents of Oslo. The following quote from one of the founding members describes the current form of the organization and some of the outcomes of participation.

"We have learned a lot about organizing, and that of running an organization, and that's because of the way we ran it the first years, we put a lot of energy into it. And then we felt, we started in this organization because we wanted to learn something practical and do something practical, and so we felt that maybe we weren't getting to do so much of that, cause we were organizing other people all the time, who was to get a chance to learn something. Now we are focusing more on what we want to do and learn practically. But we have learned some things, for example growing, which we've been doing for some years. And we've also gotten to know other people in the group, and we do things together." (Marie, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

Being present in the city, with its many distractions and "other things to do" also places certain constraints on the form of the organization.

"It also has something to do with how you learn to run an organization within the Transition model, you use a method were you arrange people and so on, but it's very different depending on whether you are in a city or the countryside. So for example, the initiative in Landås in Bergen, it's located at the outskirts of Bergen and is a very defined area with a stable population. And they have a much more stable organization, while if you are in the middle of the city you need a much more open mind, 'cause people come and go, and that has to be okay because otherwise you can't run an organization" (Marie, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

In relation to this the outcomes of the projects were emphasized over seeking recognition that it was “part of Transition Sagene”.

“For Transition Sagene it's not “Yeah, Transition Sagene did this, that's right”, the most *important thing is that something has happened. We are not interested in marketing our name, the goal of Transition Sagene is that it should be canceled, because so much is going on. There has been talk about “okay, there's a lot of things happening in the city right now, should we continue?”*. So when people don't know about *Transition Sagene, but know about projects like the trailer garden, is fantastic”* (Paul, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

It's easy for an organization to claim that it will only be around as long as there is a need for it. Nonetheless, the mutable and changing nature of Transition Sagene to some degree corroborates this claim. As related above, the history of Transition Sagene was also described as one of starting up in an “environmentally uninterested climate” and going from movie-nights to active project management to the present point of seemingly “winding down” and focusing on practical learning for the participants.

Transition Sagene: Incubating secondary outcomes

Another example given of outcomes from the work being done in the organization where, secondary, more focused, initiatives springing out of experimental projects held within Transition Sagene.

“So there is a lot that springs out of Transition Sagene, like The Bike Kitchen, my other group. Or *we have a LETS, with a sharing-economy concept. Things spring out and take on a life of their own. But they don't have to say “We're from Transition Sagene”all the time, that's not what we want”* (Paul, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

“A lot of amazing things has come out of my participation, the business *I started came out of my involvement in the Transition movement, maybe not so much from what we do her but from inspiration from Transition towns in other places, especially Great Britain where a lot of enterprises has had their origins in Transition-initiatives. Because they have become more and more engaged in strengthening the local society economically, and in that one should have sustainable enterprises., that's at least a very concrete thing that has inspired me. ... the thing*

with courses, in regards to disseminating knowledge, I've learned enormously from that, and I feel very secure in disseminating and holding courses, I think I can thank Transition for that, my participation there, it's been a low threshold for me to join, and I've gotten an experience, which maybe I couldn't have gotten in any other way" (Anja., Founding member, Transition Sagene)

These secondary outcomes are interesting when thinking of Transition Sagene as engaged in a form of experimentation. The stakes are not that high in the original setting, allowing participants to try out ideas while receiving some help and experience from their fellow members. As the above quote exemplifies, the member had gotten a chance to try out and develop skills related to course-holding and dissemination of knowledge, useful in starting up her enterprise. Similar to the difference between the agency-oriented and open democratic nature of Transition Sagene as compared to the more formal and transparent nature of representative democracy, there might be a mutually beneficial relationship between the open-ended, “playful “and experimental, nature of Transition Sagene and the more formalized and focused outcomes of these experiments in the city. The emphasis on not claiming responsibility or merit from secondary outcomes is perhaps also a sign of this open-ended approach, in a sense of seeding the urban landscape and seeing what takes root. Similar to the cooperative, Transition Sagene is also economically autonomous. Though they apply for funding for specific projects, “daily operations” is based on people's free time and voluntary engagement. This no doubt plays a role in keeping the open-ended nature of the initiative intact, whereas a reliance on external funding brings with it more narrow obligations and the necessity of “claiming ownership” of concrete outcomes, so as to market oneself for future funding.

Transition Sagene: Creating opportunities for learning and reimagining the urban space

Transition Sagene is, as the name implies, based and focused in its activities mainly in Sagene. In line with the Transition philosophy, it focuses its attentions on a local scale, and seeks to transition through various projects and activities. Examples of this of particular interest to a food-democracy framework are the various food-skills taught through various courses, the urban gardens at Geitmyra where Transition Sagene plays a role, and the recently started seed-library in collaboration with the local library at Torshov.

The following quote describes the important role of courses, dealing with various practical skills, to the work of Transition Sagene.

“We have held courses for almost five years, it's always fully booked, we just announce on Facebook and send out our mailing list, and it's filled up. It's great that there is an interest for growing, cooking, composting, bike-maintenance, there is a crazy amount of people who really want to learn the practical stuff. So then you know you have a really good offer, that it matches up with interests” (Paul, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

All in all, the courses held by Transition Sagene (together with other, similar, initiatives in Oslo) bring in knowledge and skills forgotten or disparaged. As an example, the course on foraging wild plants in the city had been one of the most popular ones. Foraging inside the city shows Nature in the Social and blurs dualistic boundaries between Natural Outside and Urban Inside.

” that useful-plants walk that I've held four years in a row, that maybe makes me happier than anything else, because people get so happy and they say 'Oh I've learned so much, I didn't think you could find so much good things in the city, right outside the door I can harvest my dinner!'. It's a simple thing, but it's nice to be able to give that to people”. – (Anja, Founding Member, Transition Sagene)

Another example is the seed library recently started together with Deichmanske library at Torshov. The seed library can potentially act as practical platform for disseminating knowledge about seeds and seed saving, quality of seeds and plants, greater knowledge of the biological and ecological relationships behind the food that people eat. Though it might be hard (and not necessarily desirable) to reach and replace the quality and work of professional seed-growers, the seed library might serve as practical learning piece, to sensitize participants to both the problems and challenges inherent in seed propagation and the ecological origins of their vegetables.

Together, the courses, the urban gardening and the seed library can serve as examples of how experimental work like that of Transition Sagene can serve to re-imagine the city, and bring in question of environment, ecology and food production. Over time, the various courses and projects of Transition Sagene might serve to create a community of practice around different skills and crafts. It might not be plausible to think that all members of Transition Sagene learn as much, or that all the various one-off participants in courses retain or make use of the information they are exposed to there. The very point of thinking of knowledge as “situated” is that it is not enough to be given new knowledge, but that it has to be put to use practically and embedded in social relationships around it (similar to the notion of civic relationships (McIvor and Hale, 2015)). This is exactly what Transition Sagene seems to have offered for its more active members, a chance to carry out and learn new skills and knowledge while being able to benefit from the knowledge of older members. Such ideas then might go on to germinate in other areas, such as Gruten or the Bike Kitchen. It is not an organization (at least not at the moment) that has a specific strategic goal and follows a set of tactical steps to approach that goal, but instead embraces a more open-ended experimental approach in which the coming and going of various individuals and ideas serve to set the agenda. If one were to think of it in wider context of a form of “ecology” of organizations, organizations like Transition Sagene might serve a similar function to a seed bank or seed library, being a place for collecting and regenerating knowledge and inspiration which can grow and return at a later date.

Analysis

“All the working groups, and all single members, has a very, large degree of freedom, and we are very dependent on... if a person has a good idea and wants to carry it through, they're likely to do so” (Kristiane, Cooperative Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

” Generally the thing with Transition is that it is an experiment, a way of testing new ways of working locally” Anja, Founding member, Transition Sagene

As organizations with goals, there is a need for efficiency and practical effects, food has to be ordered, packaged and distributed, or courses must be held, seed libraries run, etc. Assuming people actually improve over time, a stability in who does what is beneficial. On the other hand, as influence in both initiatives are primarily gained from active participation, a flow of members in and out of active roles would be beneficial to democracy through greater access and influence, and

also to adaptability/resilience through dissemination of knowledge. As discussed in the first part of this chapter, both organizations have addressed issues of commitment and time, as well as needs to generate results, in similar but different ways. Both share a facilitation and supportive approach to leadership and coordination, emphasizing the value of flat hierarchies and democratic participation and individual agency, while admitting the problems inherent in achieving this. The cooperative, having a stricter agenda, has employed a coordinator to act as mediator and facilitator in the daily discussion and work within the cooperative. It has also generated plans for a “Cooperative Academy”, a crash-course in what the cooperative is and what different working groups do for new members. Transition Sagene, with a more open agenda, has switched from a tightly coordinated form to a more open one, in which long-standing members act as support and encouragement to new members with ideas, and deriving new energy and motivation from that process themselves.

As for results, the agendas and rationale-of-existence of the two initiatives are different enough that comparison becomes hard. The Cooperative, as an experiment in economic democracy, emphasizes the benefit to farmers. From a participatory democratic perspective, the most interesting part of this ambition is the ongoing discussion and collaboration between farmers and the cooperative, both in informal settings such as farm trips and parties, but also in more formal settings such as farmer-cooperative meetings. As for Transition Sagene, the results seem more heavily weighted toward the capacity-building of the members and of creating a platform for participatory and open-ended community development in Sagene. It might be seen as an “opportunity-for-agency” for citizens in Sagene and Oslo, where the threshold for entry, but also exit, is very low but where there is a stable source of knowledge present in the form of the core-group. It has also served as an incubator for other, more formal or established initiatives, such as Gruten or Sykkelkjøkkenet.

One important outcome of both initiatives is their experimental nature itself. Formal democracy, as in transparency of decision-making, consensus, and coordination of work, demands clear guidelines and standardized procedures. The demands of fulfilling a set of similar tasks reliably over time also call for more standardization. On the other hand, more politically open-ended, plural, experimental processes demand a messier atmosphere: friction, debates, as well as “serious” play. Both these dimensions are present in the cooperative and in Transition Sagene, in different ways. This tension inherent in any experimental politics need not be a problem, but can be harnessed as a productive force.

Participatory democracy rests on the assumption that people can improve over time and learn from their mistakes, but that that process is far from a simple, “rational”, “being-exposed-to-new-

information-and-changing-ones-ways”. Instead, the premise is that knowledge and values are thoroughly embedded in the social and material context of people's lives. Because of this, changes in worldview rarely happen overnight, but needs an experiential basis. One way this could happen is through participation in collective practical endeavours to change or realize ideas and values, what Glasser refers to as social learning (Glasser, 2007). One of the ambitions of this thesis is to bridge these two theoretical fields, providing social learning with a structurally critical dimension, and participatory democratic theory with a conceptual toolbox for evaluating and understanding the capacity-building that participatory democracy offers.

So far, this thesis has explored the parts of food democracy that fall under a democratic heading: How the participants in the Cooperative and Transition Sagene think about participatory democracy, and what they perceive as important outcomes of such collaboration. The next chapter explores capacity-building dimension of that participation, both in terms of learning to work together as well as learning new skills and insights related to food and agroecology in the city.

Chapter 2: Social Learning

As stated in the theoretical chapter, the benefit and function of participatory democracy rests on its capacity building potential. It is not simply a question of individuals gaining new skills, but of groups of people developing together. As McIvor & Hale describes the concept of “deep democracy”, individuals collaborating and dealing with particular issues over time builds “civic relationships” (2015), on which rests both the quality of democracy as well as the practical capacities of such groups. Similarly, Donna Haraway conceptualizes knowledge as situated, enmeshed in social relationships and altered and developed over time through interaction. In a sense, the capacities are inherent in the relationships, and only partially in the individuals themselves (Bell, 2007). At the same time, her concept is an attempt at transcending “realism versus constructionism”, seeking to “have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world” (Haraway, 1998). This is to retain a sense that even though knowledge is local and situated, there are still better narratives than others, and better ways of being in the world. This leads on to

the concept of social learning introduced in the theory chapter, which can serve to theorize and develop this process of finding better knowledge together. The highest-order of active learning described by Glasser is that of co-learning where equals participate in a mutually enriching process of finding out, a similar aspiration to that of participatory democracy. The following chapters will seek to analyse and understand the experience and stories of the participants in the two initiatives, and to seek lessons for democracy-as-learning in future agroecological food systems.

Learning about food and the food system:

Both initiatives held courses on various topics related to food and food skills. In the cooperative these dealt mostly with food skills, such as lacto-fermentation or how to deal with “new” food, for example parts of animals that are not commonly used in Norwegian cooking. Transition Sagene held a more diverse range of courses, such as food skills such as sourdough-baking or lacto-fermentation, urban agriculture skills such as gardening and seed saving, and resource-saving endeavours such as repair and redesign of clothes and furniture. For the members that this study interviewed, being the most active participants of both initiatives, there were also examples of “informal” or secondary learning arising from the organization of the above courses and the participatory work described above.

Transition Sagene: “The Great Reskilling”

” People shouldn't just get knowledge, they should participate in that knowledge and the practical side of what we do. Telling people of the end of the world isn't very fun. It's participatory, that I help them take a part of that knowledge. not just telling people something but that they find something new that they want to take with them” (Anja, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

Transition Sagene holds various courses on gardening, urban plant foraging, fermenting foods such as sourdough and lacto-fermentation. This is in line with the heavy emphasis on skill-based learning within the wider transition network, called the “Great Reskilling”, aimed at regenerating skilful crafts on a local level necessary for the local-economic vision of Transition Towns (<https://transitionnetwork.org/ingredients/deepening/great-reskilling>). There seems to be a strong sense of “learning-as-we-go” in the initiative, where courses serve not only as a way of

disseminating new information but also as a way of learning for the active participants of Transition Sagene. For example, in my interview with one of the participants who had previously been responsible for various courses mainly to do with food skills, such as sourdough baking and lacto-fermentation of vegetables, she pointed out that she had not really known so much about the process involved before starting out, nor had she much experience in organizing courses. The effects of this, according to her, was both to develop and learn on her own, but also to learn from participants, and to inspire other people to hold their own courses. She conveyed a sense of open-ended learning, perhaps best exemplified in a “drop-in” fermentation course, described in the following quote:

“Yes, a specific course that I have held several times is a lacto-fermentation course, as in fermentation of vegetables. It's a very simple method, it's just one kind of fermentation, one method, where you cut up the vegetables ... and you can use several techniques, but the technique I feel works best, that gets people involved, where they get a feeling of how it works, is to use the hands to press out the liquid, and add some salt, and then this lactofermentation gets started. So that was a very hands-on, very simple kind of course, but it has been super-popular. I've held it at least 6-7 times over the time of three years. Both with sign-ups and without, I think in the start in general it was very formal, the courses in Transition Sagene, we wanted a lot of sign-ups, but then people sign-up and they don't arrive, and so on. So I learned a lot from that, toward the end it was more of a drop-in lacto-fermentation, and that was very successful”

(Anja, Founding member, Transition Sagene)

She further defined her own experience of participating in such a course as follows.

“Bit of tricky question, at least when I learned about lacto-fermentation it was very fascinating that it was so easy, it was a technique that was very old and which has been forgotten in Norwegian society at least, because here it can be done so quickly, you buy sugar and vinegar and that makes it a lot easier. But it's that transformation in a way, you have the vegetable and you work a bit with it and it turns into something completely different. But exactly what happens in people's heads is a bit tricky for me to say, I think most people think it's a fascinating process, and the fact that you use the body in the process gives you a more genuine experience and you understand it better. That's learning by doing.” *(Anja, Founding member, Transition Sagene)*

This was not just for other people, but she also defined the courses as a learning opportunity for herself and other members, as a form of collective sharing of knowledge within the initiative.

“So it's been such a, it's been very educating to convey, to hold courses, without being an expert. Everyone is sitting on some knowledge or has a commitment that most people want to learn about. So I think that's kind of a core value within the transition-movement. To convey your own knowledge, as well as the practical approach” *Anja, Founding Member, Transition Sagene*

These descriptions of courses come close to the definition that Glasser gives of active social learning, in the sense of co-learning as based on “non-hierarchical relationships” and “shared exploration” (Glasser, 2007). Perhaps learning about lacto-fermentation won't lead directly to world-saving, but it is an important basis for developing and experimenting with these modes of working together and learning, as opposed to passive information-receiving or the hierarchical nature of expert-advice. Also, re-skilling, or at least re-acquainting, people in the city with food-craft might serve to deepen the connection between them and food, and to play a part in creating a basis for new relationships between people.

Oslo Cooperative: Farm trips

” People learn tangible things, people go to farms, they participate in weeding, they *harvest potatoes, a lot of them haven't done that before.*” (Lisa, Working group coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

” Everyone who goes on the trips think it's nice to see these farms, and how the food is produced *that you get in the bag. Also because the farmers think it's really fun and they take really good care of us, and we eat together and then we get to harvest potatoes and get to do something very tangible, that few people have done before maybe, so it's been very positive, in my opinion.*” ” (Ingrid, Working Group Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

The quotes above relate to the annual farm trips arranged by members of the cooperative. As the quotes exemplify, the farm trips were presented as opportunities for learning, with limitations. Picking potatoes gives a physical experience of farming, and the chance to talk and interact between farmers and members might give rise to” communicative learning”, in the sense of understanding each other's situation a bit better (Milestad et al., 2010). It was noted by a respondent from the events-group that all the farmers who accepted trips gave positive feedback, and that some had also taken the initiative to arrange trips, implying that it was seen as beneficial from the farmer's side. As for learning, there were some limitations. The short amount of time spent on the farms, (one day, for roughly three trips a year), and the limited experience of the participants, meant that more complicated issues and challenges related to farming is effectively out of reach. (MF). There was also a” hair-thin” balance between the concrete needs of the farmers for help with the” tedious” tasks available to skill of the participants, and the limits to enjoyment that can be gotten from such

tasks. The following quote discusses the limits to the learning that could be gotten from such activities.

” About that feeling of mastering something, it happens that we do different things, so that the first time we harvested carrots, and this time it was potatoes. That says itself, you recognize the setup then 'Yeah okay, we're going up in those big baskets there, and then we're going up in those big jars, and then he has to plow before we can...' but it's very simple things we do, so it doesn't take a lot” (Ingrid, Working Group Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

Even though there are limits to what can be learned from sporadic farm-trips, it does mean that farmers become more present in the lives of the participants. Farm trips were one example of this, but the farmers selling to the coop were also active in other parts of the cooperative. They were invited to the annual meeting, and also showed up at more informal events arranged by the cooperative, such as Christmas dinners.

Oslo Cooperative: Being exposed to new food

” Yes, recipes, preparation, all kinds of similar stuff i think people have learned a lot about. Using different kinds of food, some new kinds of vegetables, that you've never tried before” (Lisa, Working group coordinator)

” What's nice is that when you've bought a bag, you have a lot of vegetables at home that you have to use up, so it was both because it was healthy, and because it was fun and a bit of a challenge” (Kristiane, Cooperative Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

The cooperatives members do not choose themselves what they will get in each order, instead this is based on what the farmers have on hand. This seemed to lead to both some friction and some interesting initiatives on part of the members. Being exposed to new food created some productive tensions in finding out what could be done with the new produce. Especially in the case of meat-deliveries, since the philosophy was that farmers delivering meat should be able to sell whole animals to the cooperative, and not just the choice cuts. The following quote is a description of this phenomenon, and the perception of the communication coordinator on the impact of the decision to simply deliver what the farmers brought.

“I think it’s been interesting with the meat deliveries, in that we get so many different kinds of meat, because one of the premises for the meat deliveries is that the farmer should be able to just slaughter some animals, five animals, and then deliver the whole animal, and that way everyone one can't get the same thing. But when the awareness of how many parts that are on an animal, and how many parts are usually not used when consumers only ask for fillet’s... I'm just guessing, but based on the questions we get and how much energy we've used to communicate this, I mean, how important it is that the farmer can use the whole animal, and that you then have to get a lot of weird things in your meat-bag. Based on that I think one has really learned something, about meat-production. You learn a lot about food-production in general, I think so” (Lisa, Working Group Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative)

Even though the philosophy is to use the whole animal, this was reported to sometimes be a bit contentious, as the following quote discusses.

“We've thought about having partitioning-courses, just to offer that information. But as for feedback [from the members], there hasn't been a lot. I think people sort of get it, but when, well one time there was a bit too much bones for broth, and not a lot of meat, then there was a bit of a bad mood, so it's always a balancing-act, where we trust the farmer to make those choices, but we also see that we have to go in and control the contents of the bag a bit more, and make sure it gets a better distribution of different parts, that the contents are more exciting. But at the same time that's kind of the philosophy, that this is how it is, because an animal has this and this many bones, it has this and this much meat that can be minced, this and this much meat that can be used in a stew. So we try to mirror, what it means to butcher an animal” (John, Board member, Member of Meat & Dairy group, Oslo Cooperative)

In terms of learning, the communications group sent out general information on new produce, but there had also been more spontaneous outcomes as a response to dealing with unfamiliar food. The following quote describes two different Facebook-groups that had been started to deal with unfamiliar food, one for exchanging contents in the bags that the receivers did not want (for example, onions for potatoes) and one for exchanging advice and recipes on what to do with specific foodstuffs.

“The two facebook-groups where there is really a feeling of community, a society or a cooperative, is the exchange-group and the recipe-club ... There is a lot going on there, in the exchange-group especially, people who want to buy and sell bags, people who can stomach this or that, people who don't like potatoes try to trade them away. It works very well, they usually manage to trade away what they don't want, and that leads to people having to meet physically, cause then they usually meet at the bag-delivery to trade. And in the recipeclub there is a lot of nice sharing of tips for what you can use the foodstuffs for. And what I especially like about that is

that it's not just "here is a good recipe from some website" but more like "Tonight me and the family made this" and there's a picture of the dish. Yeah, that's really nice." (*Lisa, Working Group Coordinator, Oslo Cooperative*)

One interesting conclusion to draw from these descriptions is that learning seems to take place as a result of a certain friction. First of all, the cooperative has made a kind of collective decision, enshrined in the statutes, to support the farmers. One of the outcomes of this is to remove the choice from the individual members of "what to buy", creating a situation in which they are "forcibly" exposed to vegetables and meat that they are not used to or know what to do with. However, the cooperative itself offers a platform for collectively dealing with this, both through formally disseminating information on what to do with "this week's bag", but also by providing a kind of communal base for embedding knowledge in, in the sense of members sharing recipes or experiences that they have made on their own, building up a reservoir of food-skills. To some extent this "de-individualizes" consumption of food. The collaborative structure of the cooperative likely plays an important role in enabling this kind of social learning, by providing the framework and structure in which it can take place.

The democratic nature of the Coop also provides a mechanism for feedback to farmers and decision-makers, as well as necessitating the explanation and dissemination of the rationale for using the whole animal or seasonal vegetables. Similar to the tensions inherent in liberal democracy between liberal values and the will of the people (Mouffe, 2000), there is a tension between the democratic nature of the cooperative and the values that informs it. The members can potentially vote to stop supporting the farmers or to stop restricting the cooperatives buy-in to organic production. On the other hand, the participatory democracy of the cooperative could be devolved over time to protect said values. The ongoing discussion and learning is then quite vital in keeping this tension "productive", in the sense that democratic demands challenge and chafe against the values, while the values limit what is to be discussed, as well as challenge the individual members to question their own worldviews.

Analysis

A useful concept for thinking about the potential value in the kind of urban learning about food that happens in the two initiatives is that of the metabolic rift. The metaphor of a rift is used to conceptualize the unbalanced nature of both material and social connections between cities and its surroundings. In a material sense it deals with the concentration of nutrients and energy in cities, harvested from a periphery that does not receive a compensating flow of, for example, humanure (Schneider and McMichael, 2010). In a more social sense, it deals with the disconnection of people in cities from the practical experience and knowledge of food production (Schneider and McMichael, 2010), or their alienation from the agroecology of food production (McClintock, 2010).

Closing or narrowing” the rift” is very important for creating a functional food democracy, and the generation of open learning-processes plays an important part in this. The meetings between the farmers and the coop can be seen as a more social procedure on how production should be organized, rather than letting this happen solely through the more anonymous market. It also forms a link or bridge across the rift, creating a situation where city-dwellers are forced to take on-farm considerations they are otherwise not exposed to in the grocery store. As Kristiane, the cooperative coordinator, put it” if society wants us to run agriculture in that way [organic] then maybe we have to, no not maybe, we have to have respect for that and admit that it's not the case that a carrot costs so and so much”

I think it can be argued that this decreases the mystification otherwise present in the food system. Participating and learning about food with other people makes food more than just a commodity. It can become a material thing to organize around democratically and provide reason and space for meaningful participation. The various recreational activities undertaken by Oslo Cooperative, such as pubs, dinners, cooking classes, and the informal exchange of cooking ideas on Facebook, as well as the slightly more abstract membership itself, provides an opportunity to belonging. Food becomes an organizing node or issue which (to some extent) allows a reforging of civic relationships otherwise lost in the intense division of labor in the city, allowing food to act as a vessel to “produce relational goods, by allowing the exchange of meanings and values and sharing the enjoyment of food production and consumption as social and identity-reinforcing activities.” (Renting et al., 2014). Several respondents noted participation in a positive sense, as a source of new knowledge, friends, and of achieving a sense of ease from realizing their needs and ambitions

in relations to environmental and social concerns. Differences between Oslo Cooperative and Transition Sagene seemed to be mostly related to scale, where most Transition Sagene respondents portrayed participation as being among a "group of friends", a community, while most respondents from the coop portraying participation in a more anonymous way, pointing out that they only knew personally a few of the members, and one saying that the cooperative had moved away from an "excel-list" level, perhaps implying that the intimacy of the early days were lost.

Participatory democratic work provides opportunities for realizing values through practice, and to develop, clarify and experiment with said values. The fact that all of the respondents emphasized the voluntary and collaboratory nature of the initiatives, gives credibility to this claim. Especially in the more intimate setting of Transition Sagene, it seemed like the ambition to create practical examples of societal transition served as a basis for the lasting relationships called for by McIvor (2015). However, from what I've seen and heard, it seems that the civil food initiatives serve more as platforms to act on an already present" orientation toward the community good", rather than as a basis for acquiring it. This also hints at a limitation in my study, in the sense that I've mainly interviewed central figures in both initiatives, who are no doubt the most active. Nonetheless, the opportunity to act on an orientation is also an opportunity to develop it, and also to define socially what" the community good" entails, a vital part of the process of democracy.

Conclusion

Karl Polanyi understood attempts at regulating markets and capitalism by society (for example labour unions or environmental movements) as arising from spontaneous defensive measures against the damage done by commodification. This view contrasts from liberal views in which such measures are seen as dangerous encroachments on individual rights. Polanyi, writing in the 1940's, saw the rise of social democracy and labour movements as his famous “double-movement”, society protecting itself and in the process, transcending market society into something new (Polanyi, 1985). Today, it seems Polanyi was too optimistic, as Thatcher's claim that there is no alternative is as strong as ever and the greatest economic crisis since the 30's has led to no noticeable change in the economic structure of the world (Mirowski, 2013) the problems and contradictions that created the 2008 crash still in place (Mirowski, 2013). This happens in the context of increasing global temperatures, and an enormous decline in biodiversity, both within and outside of agroecological systems. The cheap energy fuelling the industrial system is rapidly running out, and no concerted alternative is on the horizon.

Through democratic participation in civic food networks, individuals live out and experiment with their values, and in doing so, create a process of social learning where the new imaginaries necessary for a future sustainable social and economic organisation are [tentatively] developed. Though civil food initiatives possess the potential for new democratic forms of life and food, they are not certain to deliver it. Democratic forms need to keep developing and effects on a wide societal level is still small. Coalition building is essential for wider success in altering the food system, but in creating effective coalitions for change comes new challenges to participatory democracy. The tentative, experimental, open-ended nature of said initiatives are vital. Mistakes must be made, and a courage to risk them retained. This in combination with a structured approach to learning, for example through action research collaborations with universities, could generate lessons useful for future, more wide-spread adoption of democratic forms of work.

Starting in the food system has many benefits. On a pragmatic level, there is already a potential movement away from large industrial and anonymous systems, through localizations of food chains, new modes of producer-consumer relations and re-negotiations of rural-urban boundaries, the pitfalls and potentials of which was discussed above. On a theoretical level, the demands of agroecological systems, diversified, decentralized and knowledge-intensive, chime with the appeals

of a democratized economy. The sheer complexity of such systems defy the simple logic necessary to centralized planning, as well as the reductionism of “free” markets. A third way would be to strive for learning societies.

Civil food-networks hold a potential for bridging social and material concerns in food systems, being voluntary and somewhat democratic while trying to deal with feedback questions in terms of knowledge and food sustainability. They might serve as incubators of practical new ideas for future food systems. They might also offer opportunities for academic-civil partnerships through participatory research methods taken from action research or soft systems approaches. Through these, practical theory can be constructed and tested, developing the democratic character, the ecological knowledge/capacity and the learning capacity of food networks, while exploring new methods for groups and people to develop their capacities and agency over time. If agroecology is a move away from mere science and practice, and seeks to intentionally include the entire ecology of the food system, then each of us need to “do agroecology”, that is, to be participants and decision makers in the creation and recreation of our food-ways and lives. These two projects demonstrate that alternative food systems are democratic spaces within which agroecology might flourish and serve as direct links from the soil to farmer to eaters.

Though the times are at the moment not fruitful for such experiments on a wider scale, technocracy and austerity being the general consensus, a future might come when a wider discussion of alternatives again appear. If a point is reached in which a sufficiently broad and powerful coalition of progressive elements is formed, enabling once again an attempt at transforming society in a new direction, there will be a great need both for theoretical ideas and practical experience. For agroecology, defined as the ecology of food systems, preparation for this means studying both practical experiments like Transition Sagene and Oslo Cooperative, as well as linking the various ideas implicated, from systems theory to political ecology, in order to conceptualize a new democratic and just food system, which can serve both as the material basis for society, and as a regenerative force in the wider biosphere. I humbly present this thesis as a very small piece in that grand and exciting endeavour.

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Appendices

Interview guide used in the study:

1. Interview Guide:
- 2.
3. Personal info
 - a. Name & background
 - b. History of involvement?
 - c. What does the organization do?
 - d. Role in initiative?
4. Knowledge
 - a. What do participants learn by participating?
 - i. Formal learning events? Courses, etc
 1. What role do they play?
 - ii. Informal learning? Learning-by-doing, stories, events
 1. New skills?
 - b. Learning modes
 - i. Practical learning
 1. Cooking, growing, what else?
 - ii. Communicative learning
 1. Greater understanding of other peoples situations? (farmers?)
 2. Relations, collaboration, conflict mgmt
 - iii. Emancipatory learning
 1. New abilities?
 2. Change in worldview?
5. Organization:
 - a. How are decisions made?
 - i. Formally?
 - ii. Informally?
 - iii. Ask for a description of a task(ett ärende) as a practical example of decisionmaking proces
 - iv. How are responsibilities and tasks delegated?
 1. According to skill?
 2. According to will?
 3. How do you balance?
 - b. Would you describe your organisation as democratic?
 - i. Why/Why not?
 - ii. What does "democracy" mean to you?
 - c. What are some results that [organisation] generates?
 - i. For example, "gives access to organic food", "organizes people in new ways" etc.
 - ii. What kind of results are most important to you?
 1. Practical?

2. Value-changing?
3. Political?
4. Etc

6. Wider influence

- a. What is the role of the initiative in Oslo?
 - i. Responsibilities?
 - ii. Influence?
 - iii. Examples: Stories, events, etc
- b. Do you collaborate widely with other organizations?
 - i. If not, why?
 - ii. If so ->
 1. What other organizations does the initiative collaborate with?
 - a. If many, name most important, and why they are so
 - b. On which themes/tasks do you collaborate?

Excerpt from transcribed and coded interview:

J: Har du noen tanker om vad de skillnaderna kommer fra?

10F: Ja.. nei, jeg veit ikke. Vi har, akkurat nå, en situasjon hvor vi, vi har fått mange medlemmer i det siste, i høst, hvorfor vet jeg ikke helt faktisk, men ja, det falt av noen i vår når vi fornyet.. ligsom man må betale årsavgift, og så er det sommern, når ikke så mye skjer og så kom det mange i høst og da er det, da har vi, snart nesten 2000 medlemmer, og da er det ikke så mange som har vaert med fra starten, det er fortsatt mange, men procentvis så er det også noen som bare hørt om oss, sett oss på mathallen, og ikke, ikke nå mer en det.. ja, så det

Raising stakes of participation41

increasing membership41

increasing size and anonymity41

”på så excel-listenivå”41

possibilities for interacting with other members41

lacking understanding41

kan vare en grunn, att di som var kanskje med, har blitt med fra tidligere av, møtt kooperativet da vi var litt mer, på sån excel-listenivå, og att man kanskje da hade mulighet till å möte flere folk kanske.. jeg bare prøver å finne grunder, og så er det noen medlemmer, in emmelom, veldig få da, men in i mellom får jeg mail da jeg vet, ser att de har ikke skjönt systemet, og "da er det sån å sån", men det er ikke sån det funker, men det er ju da, det in i mellom, de allre fleste har ju forstået systemet



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