

## Learning, adaptation and resilience

### *The rise and fall of local food networks in Denmark*

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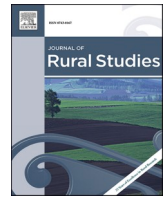
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# Learning, adaptation and resilience: The rise and fall of local food networks in Denmark

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## ABSTRACT

Across the world, network organizations have been established with the aim of promoting the production, distribution and consumption of food with local qualities. Public authorities have encouraged these 'local food networks' as potential vehicles for growth in rural and peripheral areas, but in practice some networks have succeeded while others have struggled and disappeared. This article adds to the literature on local food networks by undertaking a systematic comparison of the development of ten local food networks in Denmark in order to identify key factors that affect the resilience of local food networks. The analysis shows that networks which were dependent on temporary public funding and focused on marketing initiatives were less successful than those that were able to mobilize private sector resources and engage customers directly; for example, through markets or other food experiences. Those networks which have proven most resilient over time are those which have been able to learn and adapt their activities, and reduce their dependence on short-term project funding. Furthermore, there is evidence of learning from network failure at a regional scale as unsuccessful networks have been replaced by more resilient organizations. In terms of public policy this implies that long-term strategic commitment and in-kind support appears to be more conducive to the development of resilient local food networks than short-term project funding.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years 'local food' has become increasingly popular, as consumers seek alternatives to the homogenous industrial agro-food products of global chains of producers, retailers and eateries (Duncan and Pascucci, 2017; Goodman et al., 2011). Local food is often produced by small enterprises with highly specialized skills but limited resources, and as mainstream distribution channels are organized to suit the large-volume requirements of supermarkets and mass catering, getting local food to consumers can be a challenge in its own right (Boesen et al., 2017; McAdam et al., 2015; Tregear, 2011). Across the world, network organizations have been established with the aim of promoting the production, distribution and consumption of food with local qualities (Duncan and Pascucci, 2017; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006), and public authorities have encouraged these 'local food networks' as potential vehicles for growth in rural and peripheral areas (Tregear, 2011; Watts, 2005), much like clusters or business networks used to stimulate economic development in urban and regional settings (Fromhold-Eisebith and Eisebith, 2005; Hayden et al., 2014; Raines, 2002). Many networks

have been established on the basis of public initiative and/or seed funding (Goodman et al., 2011; James and Halkier, 2016; McAdam et al., 2015), often on the assumption that these organizations can eventually become economically self-sustaining entities, but in practice some networks succeed while others struggle, fail and disappear (Goodman et al., 2011; Lamine et al., 2019; Mohrman et al., 2016; Rytönen et al., 2013).

This article adds to the predominantly single case-based literature on local food networks by examining the development of a larger sample of networks. By undertaking a systematic comparison of ten local food networks in Denmark and how they have developed over time, we seek to identify key factors that affect the resilience of local food networks. The data show that networks which were dependent on temporary public funding and focused on marketing initiatives were less successful than those that were able to mobilize private sector resources and engage customers directly, for example through markets or other food experiences. We argue that those networks which have proven most resilient over time are those which have been able to learn and adapt their activities over time and reduce their dependence on short-term

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project funding. Furthermore, we argue that there is evidence of learning from network failure at a regional scale as unsuccessful networks have been replaced by more resilient organizations.

The article proceeds as follows. First, a review of the literature on local food networks is undertaken, identifying a small but growing body of work focusing on the drivers and barriers to the successful development of local food networks. Second, the empirical methods and the Danish context are introduced. Third, an empirical analysis of ten local food networks is presented, focusing on their development strategies and activities, and factors supporting or hindering successful development. Finally, the concluding sections discuss the relationship between key network features and their development – and considers the possible implications for public policies aimed at promoting local food as part of the agenda on regional development and sustainability.

### 1.1. Local food networks: literature review

Studies of networks promoting food with local qualities have introduced the term ‘local food network’ (Eriksen and Sundbo, 2016; Haugum and Grande, 2017; Mohrman et al., 2016; O’Kane, 2016; Roy et al., 2017; Sadler et al., 2014; Tregear, 2011), sharing many features with organizations studied under the heading ‘alternative food networks’, which typically also have a social consumption remit of bringing healthy locally-grown food to disadvantaged urban communities (Andrée et al., 2010; Beckie et al., 2012; Duncan and Pascucci, 2017; Grivins et al., 2017; Le Velly and Dufeu, 2016; Renting et al., 2003; Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016).

Many contributions to the growing literature on local and alternative food networks have been based on case-studies of one particular network and its activities, often written with sympathy for its ambitions and rarely focusing on less successful initiatives (cf. Goodman et al., 2011; Tregear, 2011). Some have described the development of a particular local food network, highlighting the importance of adapting strategies to changing circumstances while drawing on both internal and external economic and political resources (e.g., Adamski and Grolach, 2010; Lange-Vik and Idsø, 2013) – but also pointing out the fragility of networks bringing together resources from a wide range of stakeholders (Mohrman et al., 2016), and the limited propensity of small producers to invest in collective endeavours (Andrée et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2011; Haugum and Grande, 2017). McAdam et al. (2015) proposed a lifecycle model in which local networks first emerged on the basis of external knowledge resources, and then move via a ‘business network’ phase “with network collaborative product development commitment and thus tighter coupling” towards an ‘enhanced development network’ “exploring new business opportunities on the basis of external knowledge” (2015, 6). This movement between business and enhanced phases can be repeated as the network continues to develop its activities (McAdam et al., 2015), underlining the importance of adapting strategies to shifting internal and external conditions.

Other contributions have focused on a particular region rather than individual organizations, highlighting organizational coexistence and/or succession of local food networks. A contrast can be found between regions characterized by weekly coordinated and potentially fragile bottom-up efforts, as seen in studies from Ardèche, Genova and Ohio (Lamine et al., 2019; Mohrman et al., 2016), and localities where sustained political governance has produced a succession or coexistence of initiatives attempting to address evolving challenges of local food producers, as seen in studies from Skive, Bornholm and Jämtland (Henriksen and Halkier, 2014; Manniche and Larsen, 2013; Rytönen et al., 2013). Although extensive public-sector involvement is by no means a panacea, as demonstrated in the politically-driven explosion of ‘local food’ markets in Prague, which quickly outgrew the available sources of local produce (Fendrychová and Jehlička, 2018), these examples highlight the importance of studying the development of individual networks in their territorial and historical context.

Existing studies of local food networks in Denmark have given

particular emphasis to ways of mobilizing local produce and gastronomic resources (Blichfeldt and Halkier, 2014; Gyimothy, 2017; Halkier et al., 2017; Kjeldsen et al., 2013; Manniche and Larsen, 2013; Thorsøe, 2016; Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, 2016), but also relational challenges in stakeholder management (Brink, 2010; Boesen et al., 2017; Eriksen and Sundbo, 2016; James and Halkier, 2016). Systematic studies of multiple food networks are rare, with notable exceptions being a comparative study by Eriksen and Sundbo (2016) that emphasized the importance of context-relevant strategies for network activities, and two longitudinal local studies (Henriksen and Halkier, 2014; Manniche and Larsen, 2013) that highlighted the importance of resource mobilization through continued policy commitment.

In relation to debates about the key factors that determine the success or failure of local food networks, three main themes can be identified. Firstly, local food networks require continuous mobilization of resources in order to maintain and develop their activities, but there is considerable debate about the best funding strategies. As small, specialized food producers typically have limited managerial and financial resources (Andrée et al., 2010; Backe, 2013; Haugum and Grande, 2017; Petrou et al., 2007), relying on membership fees or volunteering may limit a network’s scope for collective action. However, the attraction of external funding can also be challenging. On the one hand, generation of income via network activities such as organization of consumer-engaging events typically require considerable front-end investment or community involvement (Backe, 2013; Beckie et al., 2012; Bernardi and Tirabeni, 2018; Blichfeldt and Halkier, 2014; Lange-Vik and Idsø, 2013; Tregear, 2011). On the other hand, public funding reflects potentially shifting political priorities and are typically limited in time (Meyer-Czech, 2003; Sonnino and Griggs-Trevathan, 2013; cf. Fromhold-Eisebith and Eisebith 2005). Temporary project-funding creates problems of continuity if not embedded in existing institutions, with changing public policies creating recurring “project carousels” and “subsidy jitters” (Ebbekink, 2017, 629) as local food networks pursue whatever sources of funding are available.

A second area of debate is what type of activities networks should prioritize. Some researchers have highlighted the importance of strengthening the marketing of local food by developing the technical or managerial skills of producers through training and business advice (Bonow and Rytönen, 2013; Everett and Aitchison, 2008), or through collective marketing such as websites (Goodman et al., 2011; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Haventang & Jones, 2005; Henriksen and Halkier, 2014). However, other studies have instead emphasized the importance of engaging new consumers by building new supply chains, e.g., selling to restaurants or retailers, or participating in or organizing events that allow consumers to experience local food and meet producers face-to-face (Eriksen and Sundbo, 2016; Heer and Mann, 2010; Randelli and Rocchi, 2017). While these promotional activities may be important in particular contexts, it is important to stress the different time-scales and distributions of potential gains involved. Improving marketing could enable individual members to prosper in a long-term perspective, but customer-engaging activities such as events or creation of new distribution channels constitute a potential source of immediate revenue, both for food producers and for the network itself.

Finally, there are a variety of perspectives on how best to establish and maintain a strategic fit between network activities (promotional initiatives, stakeholder management) and more or less stable network contexts (Beckie et al., 2012; Eriksen and Sundbo, 2016; Lee et al., 2015; McAdam et al., 2015; Miralles et al., 2017; Randelli and Rocchi, 2017; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). With regard to stakeholder configuration, for example, Heer & Mann’s survey of local food networks in Germany found that “inclusion of many different sectors in the network increases the success of the network in terms of turnover” (2010, 285), i.e. that bringing both producers and buyers of local food together is preferable to concentrating exclusively on the former; something that parallels Miralles et al. (2017) findings in Valencia, Spain. However, if such synergies are going to emerge, other studies clearly suggest that this

requires that network activities are adapted to the local context and that stakeholders are willing to modify their everyday practices, as demonstrated by comparative studies from Ontario (Lee et al., 2015), Zealand (Eriksen and Sundbo, 2016), and North Jutland (James and Halkier, 2016). Thus, copying successful organization elsewhere may not be appropriate (Fendrychová and Jehlička, 2018), and individual networks have to learn in order to continuously adapt to the evolving context they operate in, something which includes the impact of their own actions and the presence of parallel initiatives.

Overall, then, there is little consensus regarding specific factors or general strategies that increase the probability that local food networks will thrive. Indeed, some researchers have argued that the same factors may be both drivers and barriers to successful network development, depending on the local circumstances (Eriksen and Sundbo, 2016). Furthermore, the needs and priorities of local food networks appear to change over time, because of shifting funding possibilities, alterations in the institutional landscape or market developments. This suggests that the ability to learn and adapt to market trends and an unstable funding environment is a key factor in the success or failure of local food networks.

## 2. Methodology

In order to investigate the resilience of local food networks in Denmark, five regions were chosen in order to achieve variation with regard to local food and gastronomic resources as well as proximity to potential customers (major cities or tourist destinations). For each of the five regions we have aimed to cover all major local food networks from 2004 to 2019, and thus the article covers a total of ten networks, as listed in Fig. 1.

The vast majority of the networks had originally been established by a core group of private producers, small or medium-sized, collaborating more or less closely with a public body in order to ensure start-up

funding. The notable expectations were *Smag på Nordsjælland*, started by a few medium-sized private actors that wanted to pursue their own goals independent of public funding (Interview, network coordinator), and *Kulinarisk Sydfyn* where in-kind staff secondment gave public support a more ongoing character (Interview, Food producer).

As can be seen from Table 1, half of the networks have existed for more than ten years and remain active, while the other half have been closed down after three to eight years of operation. In three of the five regions a succession of networks were established, and in one region, Nordjylland, the most recent network has also closed down. In one region, Fyn, two networks have coexisted for nearly 20 years, specializing in events and business development respectively, but the majority of networks were established in the mid-00s in the wake of growing public and political interest in New Nordic Cooking, often on the basis of temporary project funding involving local, regional and/or EU rural development funding.

The study is based on qualitative interviews, documentary sources, and the webpages and Facebook accounts of the ten networks. Initial interviews were undertaken in 2013/2014, with supplementary interviews with network coordinators taking place in 2019, while information from digital sources has been gathered on an ongoing basis. For all regions/networks we have aimed for a diversity of informants, and the majority of interviewees are either private producers or public officials, with restaurateurs, retailers and private consultants making up the rest (see Table 2).

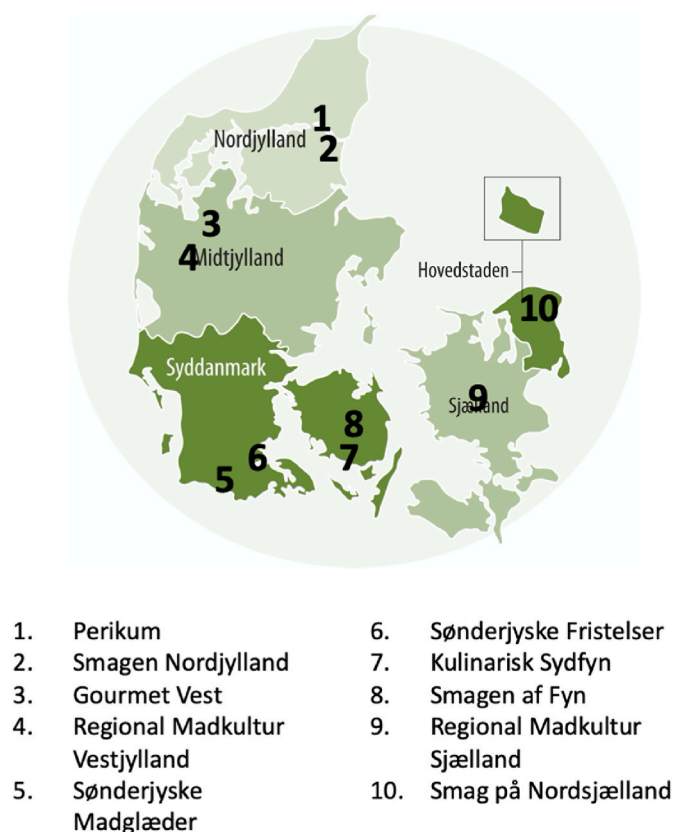
Most of the 50 interviews took place on-site at the interviewee's place of work/home, with supplementary interviews with undertaken by telephone. Interviews covered the origins, development and, if relevant, demise of individual networks, focusing especially on their activities, organization and funding. All interviews were recorded and extensively summarized, and a thematic analysis of the material was undertaken, focusing on the debates and themes identified in existing contributions to the literature. Quotes in the text are attributed to the function of the interviewee, e.g., food producer or restaurateur.

## 3. Contextualizing local food networks in Denmark

For more than a century extensive cooperative industrialization and temperate climatic conditions have allowed Denmark to become a major exporter of agri-food products. The sector is dominated by large units producing for the national and international markets, and a retail sector dominated by a few national supermarket chains (Kjeldsen et al., 2013; Kristensen et al., 2017). Food with 'other qualities' has, however, grown

**Table 1**  
Operation of local food networks in Denmark.

Region	Network	Established	Discontinued	Years of operation (as of 2020)
Fyn	Kulinarisk Sydfyn	2000		21
	Smagen af Fyn	2002		19
Nordjylland	Perikum	2005	2007	3
	Smagen	2007	2014	8
Sjælland	Nordjylland			
	Regional Madkultur	2006	2013	8
Sønderjylland	Sjælland			
	Smag på Nordsjælland	2008		13
Vestjylland	Sønderjyske Madglæder	2005	2007	3
	Sønderjyske Fristelser	2009		12
Vestjylland	Gourmet Vest	2003	2006	4
	Regional Madkultur	2010		11
Vestjylland	Vestjylland			
	Vestjylland			



**Fig. 1.** Map and list of local food networks researched.



**Table 2**  
Number of interviews in each network.

Region	Primary producers	Food manufacturers	Restaurants/attractions	Retailers	Government, public body	Private consultant	Total
Nordjylland	2	0	0	0	2	1	5
Vestjylland	2	2	1	1	5	2	13
Sønderjylland	0	2	1	1	3	1	8
Fyn	2	2	0	0	4	3	11
Sjælland	5	0	1	2	4	1	13
Total	11	6	3	4	18	8	50

in importance in recent decades: mass-produced organic products constitute 12% of food consumed in Denmark in 2020 (Danmarks Statistik, 2021), and food products with ‘local qualities’ has gradually emerged on the market, mostly produced by small niche producers for local or regional customers. It is impossible to quantify the share of local food produced and consumed in Denmark because no national certification scheme exists and very little use is made of the terroir-like EU certification (Halkier et al., 2017; Parrott et al., 2002). Still, public interest in local quality food has been growing at least since 2004 when prominent Danish cooks along with Nordic colleagues issued a much-publicized *Manifesto for the New Nordic Kitchen* (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014), insisting that innovative use of local produce could create a world-class kitchen with respect for environment and animal welfare. Moreover, local and regional authorities have used local food and gastronomy to further rural development and/or increase the attraction of tourist destinations (James and Halkier, 2016; Kristensen et al., 2017). Many small networks of local producers were established, and the umbrella network *Taste of Denmark* (Smagen af Danmark, <http://www.smagenafdanmark.com/>) and the associated *Danish Knowledge Centre for Food Innovation* (Videnscenter for Fødevareudvikling, <http://www.vifu.net/>) constituted a framework for knowledge exchange and political leverage. Bornholm is the Danish locality that has become most strongly associated with local food thanks to sustained public support, a distinct gastronomic heritage build around smoked fish, and, not least, the presence of a number of major private firms and successful entrepreneurs (Manniche and Larsen, 2013; Gyimothy, 2017; Kristensen et al., 2017).

### 3.1. Developing local food networks in Denmark

The analysis of the development of the ten local food networks in Denmark is organized according to three themes: funding and resources; network activities; and learning and adaptation.

### 3.2. Funding and resources

In order to instigate and develop promotional activities, local food networks have to mobilize resources, and the international literature provides many examples of both volunteer-based self-coordination and professional hired/bought-in network management (Bessiere, 2013; Deery et al., 2012; Lange-Vik and Idsø, 2013; Lee et al., 2015).

All the ten Danish organizations investigated have to some extent relied on volunteer members to undertake collective tasks such as arranging meetings, collecting membership fees, maintaining websites, and organizing promotional events. This requires a reasonably constant commitment of key volunteers, and its limits were often commented on by interviewees:

“It’s no bloody use that I am doing these [organizational] things in the evening after the kids have gone to bed and till late. We need to organize in a more professional manner – and that will require additional funding” (Interview, Food producer)

Volunteering is only dominated by small private firms in one of the five long-term resilient networks, *Regional Madkultur Vestjylland*, while in the four other resilient networks in-kind contributions have primarily

been made by relatively large private firms (*Sønderjyske Fristelser*, *Smag på Nordsjælland*) or local public economic development bodies (*Kulinarisk Sydfyn*, *Smagen af Fyn*), making the individual networks heavily dependent on the fortunes of their key stakeholders.

Similarly, all ten networks have at some point of their existence been able to mobilize financial resources that allowed them to employ a professional coordinator, something that can help professionalize operations and activities while letting members concentrate on their own businesses. While resilient networks are aware of their dependence on having a professional coordinator with a long track-record – “he IS the network, plain and simple as that” (Interview, Tourism promoter) – the main worry for most networks is clearly financial, i.e. how to secure funding to maintain the services of a valued employee.

“If we get support from public sponsors for temporary development projects, the public sponsors are really strict about not sponsoring network administration – but you can’t run an association without a coordinator, not properly anyway” (Interview, Network coordinator)

To undertake promotional activities and coordination, local food networks rely on a combination of public and private resources, and three forms of funding – temporary public projects, membership fees, and activity-generated income – can be found in the international literature (Backe, 2013; Goodman et al., 2011; Holloway et al., 2006; Lange-Vik and Idsø, 2013). All the organizations investigated have received public funding, and all of it has been on a temporary basis: the initial setting up a network was seen as a project worthy of support from rural or regional development programs, and specific activities such as product or experience development have subsequently received sponsorship from a wide range of policy programs. While public project funding has been eagerly sought by most of the networks investigated, the drawbacks of intensive fundraising are also recognized, partly because it came to be seen as hard work – “both the application itself and administering the grant, it’s a bureaucratic nightmare, actually” (Interview, Food producer) – and the frequent shifts of focus for public funding were also challenging:

“The network had decided to follow a new line of potential funding, but many members thought that tourism was a diversion from previous efforts focusing on product development and distribution via retail outlets” (Interview, Tourism promoter)

These findings are similar to those found in studies of local food networks in many other countries (Bruckmeier, 2012; Che, 2007; Everett and Slocum, 2013; Haugum and Grande, 2017; Haven-Tang and Jones, 2005; Meyer-Czech, 2003; Thuesen et al., 2014; Tovey, 2012; West, 2014).

An obvious source of private funding is membership fees, which pool the financial resources of the participating firms, and only one network, *Gourmet Vest*, decided *not* to levy a fee due to the weak resource base of their micro-firm members. Although the remaining nine local food networks all levied membership fees, members kept a close eye on the level of fees and whether the benefits of the network justified the expense:

“I’m not planning to quit, but I’ve spoken to others who have left, and, apart from being in the network brochure, it all seems a bit fuzzy and pointless” (Interview, Food producer)

The low level of membership fees – currently between 60 and 400 Euros per year for the networks still operating – suggests that mobilizing in-cash contributions from small or micro firms is difficult, as also seen in cluster organizations with much larger firms as members (Laur, 2013).

Only three networks – *Sønderjyske Fristelselser*, *Smag på Nordsjælland*, and *Kulinarisk Sydfyn* – have managed to create income-generating activities, typically by organizing signature events like markets and other food-related experiences that contribute financially to both the network and the participating members.

“We focus on our ‘signature activities’ – events we organize plus a Christmas Gift Box service for firms – that generate income for our members and the network. We only participate in events organized by others if they are willing to pay us: Festival organizers are willing to pay for music, they have to pay for foodie entertainment too!” (Interview, Network coordinator)

International studies have suggested developing activities that bring together producers and consumers of local quality food as a way of moving in the direction of making local food networks more sustainable financially (Bernardi and Tirabeni, 2018; Boesen et al., 2017; Hall and Sharples, 2008), but the Danish experience underlines that event-making requires a considerable investment of other resources such as mobilization of a wider group of volunteers and/or the willingness of network members to invest time (and produce) by participating, one of the five resilient networks, *Regional Madkultur Vestjylland*, has instead decided to introduce a relatively high membership fee to fund ongoing activities.

### 3.3. Network activities

The overall aim of all the networks was to support small producers of local food, sometimes with an explicit view to strengthen rural development, and with a range of different approaches focusing on place branding, quality regional gastronomy, or development of local supply chains:

The purpose of the network was to develop a brand as the leading Danish food region and strengthen local producers (Interview, Network coordinator)

Our ambition was to promote good local food and regional cuisine (Interview, Network coordinator)

We aimed to create good food experiences and establish links between producers and buyers of local quality food (Interview, Network coordinator)

These intended impacts are in line with what has been found in studies of local food networks elsewhere (Goodman et al., 2011; Tre-gear, 2011), but it is worth noting a division between networks concentrating on the quality their products – e.g. *Gourmet Vest* that wanted to make regional food known for “*quality, diversity, accessibility and credibility*” (VIFU, 2008) – and others insisting on making local food part of a wider social experience:

“Our members cannot just be a point of sale, they must offer something more, an experience or a regional recipe” (Interview, Network coordinator)

The original ambitions of the Danish networks were in others ‘typically North European’ (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006) because they eschewed Mediterranean terroir and American anti-capitalist framings.

The activities through which the ten networks have tried to achieve their aims fall in two categories. The first group of initiatives aim to strengthen the marketing of local food, and, unsurprisingly, all ten networks have been involved in activities aiming to strengthen the sales of the products of their current members. In this digital age a shared basic feature is to highlight members and their products/services on the

network website in order to strengthen sales through existing channels like farm- or workshop sales or web shops, thereby complementing the marketing of individual network members:

“Marketing and distribution are the central challenges we face trying to get local food to consumers, and therefore key concerns of the network” (Interview, Food producer)

In parallel with this, other activities have sought to strengthen the competences of small food producers with regard to e.g., product development, business competences, and entrepreneurship. Recurring instruments have been providing access to advisory services and occasionally seed funding, as seen in other parts of the world (Bruckmeier, 2012; Everett, 2012; Rytönen et al., 2013), and a crucial aspect has been peer exchanges between members through a program of regular network events, although diversity amongst members can be a challenge:

“You have a geese farmer with nine persons in his shop, and then a small beef cattle thing with five cows in the back yard – I was wrestling a bit to make the meetings meaningful for both” (Interview, Network coordinator)

While few of the networks have had formal measures to encourage entrepreneurship in order to increase the number of producers of local quality food, the existence of the networks as a way to access peers may in itself have had the indirect effect of encouraging more hobby producers to ‘go commercial’:

“We try to support new producers, if nothing else then morally” (Interview, Network coordinator)

Most networks, however, also engaged in establishing and maintaining new sales channels, either by organizing or participating in consumer-oriented events like markets or festivals, or by facilitating access to retailers or restaurants. The former has the advantage of taking place at specific times and involving direct sales and customer contact, as well as being “*a signature activity that helped to brand the network as such*” (Interview, Network coordinator). In contrast, facilitating access to professional buyers is clearly more demanding in terms of financial and human resources, because here achieving exposure to new consumers comes at the price of on-going commitment that can be difficult to handle for small producers with limited resources, even when restaurateurs have become part of some of the networks. Getting access to the shelves of mainstream retailers is even more challenging because “small producers have difficulties with delivering the amount of goods required by supermarket chains” (Interview, Food producer), and some specialty producers may even “prefer to sell via specialty shops because being associated with for instance the COOP supermarket chain could undermine their own quality food brand” (Interview, Network coordinator).

Among the ten networks investigated, half of them engaged in improving indirect sales through retail outlets and restaurants, and regular involvement in food-related events was even more widespread. Both these strategies for creating new sales channels are commonly reported in the existing literature (Bos and Owen, 2016; Haugum and Grande, 2017; Holloway et al., 2006; Lange-Vik and Idsø, 2013; O’Kane, 2016; Tovey, 2012), as are the difficulties involved in making them work in practice, with issues around prices, delivery requirements and regularity (Everett and Slocum, 2013; Henriksen and Halkier, 2015; James and Halkier, 2016).

### 3.4. Learning and adaptation

As the previous sections on funding and network activities make clear, all of the networks experienced changes over time, and some experienced serious difficulties. Of the ten local food networks investigated, seven have experienced a crisis and only two of these have managed to renew their strategic orientation and continue to operate as promoters of production and consumption of local food. Of the five

networks that ceased to operate, lack of public funding cited as a major reason for closing:

“When temporary funding was no longer available, the network could no longer afford to employ a part-time coordinator, and it became difficult to sustain activities and enthusiasm” (Interview, Network coordinator)

“Lack of additional public funding reduced the level of activity significantly, and our small local food producers could no longer see the point of membership” (Interview, Food producer)

In these five cases public funding could not be replaced by mobilization of network-internal private resources, such as increased membership fees and/or in-kind volunteering, suggesting that the added value of the network was seen as limited from the perspective of its members.

However, two networks managed to move from crisis to renewal by adjusting their activities. In the case of *Regional Madkultur Vestjylland*, ambitions were adjusted in order to operate within the limits of the financial and in-kind contributions of its predominantly micro-firm membership:

“We have given up the eternal quest for external project funding, our members want to set the agenda themselves and not get pushed around by shifting political preferences or get bogged down in bureaucratic procedures” (Interview, Network coordinator)

In the case of *Smagen af Fyn*, the network moved from being driven by public project funding towards a combination of in-kind contributions, project funding for new activities, and generation of income through network activities – and being a gateway for members to specialized business development services and projects:

“We use our funding for activities, most of the organizational work is undertaken by members volunteering – but it also helps to have a constructive working relationship with public development organizations within the region, because it allows us to join their activities if our members find them relevant” (Interview, Network coordinator)

Finally, three networks did not experience any funding crisis but continued to gradually develop their strategies and promotional activities, primarily with a focus on introducing additional ways of engaging consumers with local food, e.g. new events, seasonal product packaging, or on-demand services, such as *Det rullende Sønderjyske Kaffebord* (“The Rolling Coffee Table”) that makes a huge array of regional cakes and sweets available at big and small events across the Sønderjylland region.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Having analyzed key features of ten local food networks in Denmark, it is now possible to compare the ways they have developed and seek to identify the characteristics that make some networks more resilient than others.

The development of local food networks can be analyzed from two complementary perspectives, the individual organization and the territory in which it operates. From an organizational perspective, three distinct patterns can be identified. Seven of the networks originally concentrated primarily on activities aimed at improving the marketing of individual producers’ products (joint marketing, learning between peers) and depended heavily on public funding for temporary projects. Five of these proceeded along a short, and ultimately unsuccessful, development path, ceasing to exist after on average five years of operation after having been unable to adjust their strategies to a scarcity of public project funding. The second development path consists of three networks that from the outset prioritized customer-engaging activities (events, sales to restaurants): all of these are still operating, having gradually adjusted and diversified their operation. Finally, a third way

can be seen in two networks that successfully adjusted their strategies to new circumstances, either by improving marketing efforts within the limits of internally mobilized resources (*Regional Madkultur Vestjylland*), or by adding customer-engaging activities to the existing focus on development the business competences of small food producers (*Smagen af Fyn*). From an organizational perspective the level of strategic adjustment around the Danish local food networks does in other words vary, from very little and ultimately unsuccessful, to incremental or considerable change.

However, if we shift the perspective to the territorial level, the result is rather different. Two of the five regions, Vestjylland and Sønderjylland, saw a succession of local food networks where the failure of the first led to the establishing of a new, long-term resilient, organization, suggesting that regional-level learning has taken place. In one region, Nordjylland, organizational succession took place, but while some lessons have undoubtedly been learned, the second network quickly reached a crisis phase and also eventually disappeared. Finally, two regions have seen coexistence of complementary networks: on the island of Fyn a division of labour existed between two resilient organizations that resulted in a largely constructive coexistence (e.g. through overlapping board membership) (*Interviews, Network coordinators*), while on the island of Sjælland the division of labour was largely along sub-regional geographical lines with only limited overlap in terms of membership and varying degrees of resilience. In short, the five regional cases investigated have demonstrated that regional learning may occur, although not necessarily successfully, but also that coexistence of local food networks in a region does not guarantee that interorganizational learning will take place.

Having identified the different organizational and territorial development patterns of local food networks in Denmark, what, then, may account for strategic versatility and long-term resilience among them?

Firstly, it is evident that the activities prioritized by individual networks matter a great deal. All the networks that ceased to exist have concentrated on producer-oriented activities, while four of the five networks still operating have customer-engaging activities as an important part of their profile. This indicates that the willingness of network members to fund collective marketing activities through membership fees has in practice often been limited (cf. Goodman et al., 2011; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Haventang & Jones, 2005; Henriksen and Halkier, 2014), probably because the benefits for individual members are uncertain. Conversely, despite the oft-noted considerable front-end investments, customer-engaging activities, such as events that can generate immediate financial benefits for both the organizing network and participating firms seem to have strengthened the active involvement of members in the network.

Secondly, local food networks rely to a large extent on mobilizing in-kind resources, and all the long-term resilient networks are characterized by having been able to continuously engage volunteers in their activities. It is, however, also interesting to note that only one of these, *Regional Madkultur Vestjylland*, rely on the input of small private firms, while the others have access to in-kind contributions from relatively large private firms (*Sønderjyske Fristelser, Smag på Nordsjælland*) or local public economic development bodies (*Kulinarisk Sydfyn, Smagen af Fyn*). The latter examples are the ones that, albeit on a smaller scale, emulate the successful experience of Bornholm, where continuous political priority was accorded to promoting food with local qualities (cf. Manniche and Larsen, 2013).

Thirdly, while project-based public funding clearly played an important role in helping to kick-start local food networks in Denmark in the mid-2000s, this form of funding also created a ‘project cycle’ that made networks adapt their strategies to shifting political concerns. In line with what has been found elsewhere (Ebbekink, 2017; Fromhold-Eisebith and Eisebith 2005; Meyer-Czech, 2003; Sonnino and Griggs-Trevathan, 2013), this undermined organizational continuity and stakeholder trust in the future of the network, and the project-based networks reacted in two very different ways to this challenge: most



ceased to exist (*Perikum, Gourmet Vest, Sønderjyske Madglæder*), in some cases with a continuing digital presence (*Smagen Nordjylland, Regional Madkultur Sjælland*), while a few adapted their activities to whatever sources of funding could be mobilized (*Smagen af Fyn, Regional Madkultur Vestjylland*).

All in all we can conclude that the resilience of local food networks in Denmark is strongly associated with encouraging and supporting customers and stakeholders to engage in shared activities outside the dominant national/global food supply chains. Networks that instead primarily trying to improve the marketing of their members in the local/regional market through marketing have been largely unsuccessful. Moreover, this difference appears to be associated with different resource configurations: most resilient networks benefit from access to in-kind resources from a relatively large member firm or a public sponsor willing and able to make local food a long-term priority. Conversely, networks of micro firms unwilling or unable to support their network through substantial fees have relied primarily on temporary project funding, and these have not fared well. However, it is also interesting to note that in most of the five regions these lessons would appear to have been learned: unsuccessful early networks have been succeeded by new ones with different strategies, or existing networks have managed to undertake a strategic shift towards a more resilient mode of operation. The study thereby supports the importance of long-term commitment, not just from private firms but also from public political sponsors, as argued by Sonnino and colleagues (Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013; cf. Meyer-Czech, 2003).

In conclusion, this study makes four important contributions to the literature on local food networks. Firstly, the results underline that the resilience of individual network organizations depends on both long-term support of major private or public stakeholders *and* the degree to which the activities organized by the network to promote local food are to the direct benefit both members and the network itself. Secondly, in terms of activities the data suggest that ‘making markets’ (by creating new food chains or experiences seems to be better than improving marketing. Thirdly, in terms of public policy, long-term strategic commitment and in-kind support appears to be more important than vagaries of short-term project funding. Last but not least, the study also demonstrates the value of a systematic comparative place-based research design.

## Author statement

The authors shared work on all parts of the manuscript.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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