

Local Food Can Restart from Food Hubs

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The expression has been circulating among insiders for about thirty years, and in fact, pioneers created the first food hubs as early as the late nineties.

However, because digital technologies for creating online platforms have since become much simpler and accessible even to those with low computer literacy, it is worth explaining again what **Food Hubs** are, what they are for, how they work, and, above all, why they are needed today more than ever.

Hub is an English word whose original meaning is the hub of a *wheel* , the piece from which the spokes branch out on a bicycle.

For those who have read **Foodsystem 5.0** by Alex Giordano (Edizioni Ambiente), you should be familiar with the concept of Food Hubs: they are digital platforms that serve as meeting and exchange points between demand and food production in a specific area. They manage not only the “matching” itself but also the logistics, organization, and sales. Producers register on one side, potential buyers on the other, and in the middle is the platform that ensures the requested products leave the production sites and arrive at their destination.

So, even if metaphorically Food Hubs can represent many things (a farmers’ market, a solidarity purchasing group, or a food coop), technically speaking, to be defined as such, they require two key elements: a digital platform and a local point of reference.

Digital Platforms for Looking Locally

There are several counterintuitive elements that Food Hubs bring into play, subverting the way we are used to thinking about technology applied to the agri-food sector, and which are worth reflecting upon.

We have already touched upon the first element, which concerns the essential link a Food Hub must have with a specific territory. What does ‘must’ mean? It means that by now, anyone is capable of selling food online — Amazon’s supermarkets are proof of that. If it were only a matter of organization, logistics, and profit, there would certainly be no need for Food Hubs. But good organization is not synonymous with food quality, nor with production sustainability, nor with the fairness of the economies generated.

Now that buying and selling online has become ‘normal,’ it is finally clear that digital platforms are merely a tool and do not—in themselves—constitute added value. On the contrary: we are used to thinking that digital platforms are important because they allow us to connect with distant parties. And if these parties are market players, digital platforms can become synonymous with CO2 emissions that could be saved by buying locally; synonymous with underpaid and mistreated couriers; and synonymous with money that, one way or another, always ends up in the pockets of the strongest, the largest, and the most protected—even from a tax perspective.

However, by thinking of digital platforms in this way, we risk overlooking how important they have become, instead, for connecting actors who are very close to one another but who, despite this, remain essentially strangers. Why is it that food producers in the same territory

do not ‘team up,’ and why is it that consumers in that area do not know them or find it more convenient to buy food from large-scale industry or wholesale markets?

So Close, Yet So Far

There are practical reasons why local producers and consumers remain disconnected:

- Producers within a territory are often hardly visible: they lack the communication firepower of large corporations, and they don’t have the time, resources, or skills to get noticed by consumers in their own area. Their promotion is often based on word-of-mouth or through Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS), but they can only do so much; it is easier and more immediate for a consumer to receive information about a multinational’s new organic line than it is to source lettuce from a great producer located just 3 km away, in a hamlet that doesn’t fall along their routine routes.
- Alongside this, there is an apparently trivial factor: farmers stay in the countryside, together with their products. This is not the case for the products of multinationals or the food industry in general; they reach the city with a regularity and ease based not only on logistics, but also on the invulnerability to waste that large industries can boast. Keeping points of sale stocked at all costs is a commandment; if 30% of what hits the shelves goes to waste, it isn’t a problem for them. With the remaining 70% sold, they still balance their books because production costs—at that scale and quality level—are minimal. On the other hand, the high-quality, small-scale farmers in our territories cannot afford any waste. They lack an effective distribution system and only manage to bring their products to the city if and when they can reach the very few market niches available to them—something that, for those producing unprocessed fruit or vegetables, becomes essentially impossible.

Easy Supply Chains

In light of these initial insights, the key role that Food Hubs can play is already beginning to emerge clearly: making local producers visible—visible to themselves, to other producers, and to consumers. More than that: making them accessible, ensuring that buying their products is simple and immediate, just as simple and immediate as buying products from the large-scale food and agricultural industry.

Shortening supply chains cannot mean burdening someone with the weight of transitioning to a different way of buying and selling food. Supply chains must be short, yes, but also light and easy. It is on this very ground that big industry has overwhelmingly beaten local, sustainable, and high-quality production for decades: ease of use. A Food Hub can introduce this element into the purchase of local, sustainable, and good food, thereby restoring to the act of buying local food that heritage of meaning, identity, and awareness that, generally speaking, our food purchases have lost.

Peasant Agriculture and Technology: It Can Work

The second counterintuitive element again concerns the way we tend to think of technology as an antagonist to artisanal production. This is not an unfounded thought if the goal of technology is to increase production volumes; however, technology can also be used to improve the quality of an artisanal product (as has historically happened with extra virgin olive oil) or, as is the case with Food Hubs, to distribute and utilize it better and more extensively, starting within its own territory.

In summary: it is not true that digital platforms only serve to connect distant actors; and it is not true that technology is necessarily an antagonist to quality.

A Shared Project is Needed

So, is everything settled? Can Food Hubs grow and—above all—multiply? No. In fact, there are still very few of them, but those that do exist and function well are models to be studied and emulated; they can be found in some large cities, such as Rome, or in certain very vibrant regions, like Tuscany.

Precisely because they do not function like a Solidarity Purchasing Group (GAS) or a farmers' market, Food Hubs cannot rely on the goodwill of individuals. Remember? The goal is to create short, local supply chains that do not dump the burden of their operation onto the individuals involved. Anyone who, like myself, coordinates a GAS knows how much time, patience, and energy is required to ensure that about thirty families can regularly source their oranges, extra virgin olive oil, tomato purée, or late-season radicchio. When someone asks me, 'Why do you do it? At least add a markup to the products!', I reply that I am a registered freelance journalist—I cannot sell food. But above all, I reply that this is my way of

engaging in politics and, at the same time, food education—which is, again, politics. It means standing alongside honest producers who defend our food and our planet, and making people understand that buying food can and must be a complex, beautiful, and fertile act. The thing is, this is my own individual choice, and it is not something a Food Hub could be built upon.

A Food Hub builds or reconstructs the bonds of a local production and consumption fabric: these threads are numerous and delicate; they must be nurtured with consistency, care, professionalism, and vision. This is why a Food Hub cannot work if it is merely the political action of a single person. A Food Hub works if it is the political action of a territory—its producers, its administrators, its citizens, and its entrepreneurs. It is no coincidence that the Food Hubs that actually work are those serving school canteens in a specific area, or those supplying restaurateurs coordinated into consortia or associations; or again, those connected to the kitchens of nursing homes, company cafeterias, or corporate benefits like meal vouchers.

To come into being, a Food Hub needs a framework for dialogue, choices, and radical shifts in the development model. A Food Hub requires political will—one that, having acknowledged the ongoing environmental, economic, and social disaster, recognizes that food and the way we produce and consume it has the potential to rewrite the rules of how we live together. It creates a community among ourselves and with the other living beings, plants and animals alike, with whom we share our territory, our air, and our water.

Let us try to imagine the Food Hub our territory needs in order to strengthen itself, redesign itself, and become a driver for health, the economy, employment, social equity, and ecology. It is not—it cannot be—a hobby, a worthy activity to be carried out in one's spare time. Rather, it is—it must be—the place where the will and vision of administrators, associations, research centers, citizens, producers, and entrepreneurs converge to set out once again toward the protection of the common good.

Further Reading:

Alex Giordano, *Foodsystem 5.0*, Edizioni Ambiente 2023, with particular reference to Chapter 5;

Giaime Berti, Pippo Russo, "With food hubs, distribution is being revolutionized," in *Domani*, August 9, 2023.

Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/local-food-can-restart-from-food-hubs/>