



## The Slow Food Model: A Road for Small-Scale Productions in a Globalised Market

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*Received: 31 October 2017,  
Accepted: 13 January 2018*

### Abstract

The paper presents the articulated strategy of valorization, implemented by the international movement called Slow Food in Italy and abroad in order to reconsider the concept of agricultural profitability. In particular, the paper suggests profitability lays on the value markets recognize to agricultural production. In this perspective, the Slow Food strategy represents a good practice to be emulated because it strengthens the producers' confidence, improves product culture among producers and consumers, and re-embeds local agricultural products into the hotbed of practices of society while mass consumption drives it to abandonment.

*Keywords:*  
*food, Slow Food, Italy,  
rural development*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the blooming of the so call “Green Revolution” in the post-World War II period, the main international mantra about agricultural development has been the one about land productivity (Patel, 2013). While the attention to the maximization of production is deeply rooted in a social landscape and a foodscape marked by recurrent food scarcity and famine (Campbell & Overton, 1991), over the past decades the discourse evolved echoing a neo-liberal agenda (Wolf & Bonanno, 2014). In particular, profitability has been read mostly as a direct consequence of the overall production capacity of a farm. This approach influenced technology and cultivation strategies aiming, in the one hand, at mechanizing production and, in the other, at selecting and, more recently, creating high yield breeds and species. Conversely, those strategies led to a widespread abandonment of traditional practices and varieties, leading to a world-wide depletion of bio-cultural diversity (Maffi & Woodley, 2010; Masini & Scaffidi, 2008). The severe impact of this transformation in terms of social and environmental sustainability is more and more often highlighted in the public debate. In the wake of such debate, this paper reconsiders the concept of agricultural profitability. In particular, it suggests profitability is not just about quantity but also about the value markets recognise to production. In this perspective, focusing on food industry, presents the articulated strategy of valorisation, implemented by the international movement called Slow Food, as an example of good practices that can be emulated by rural communities world-wide.

The research has been completed as part of the activities conducted by the University of Gastronomic Sciences, as a partner in the research project: “SASS: Sistemi Alimentari per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile” financed in 2017 by the Italian Ministry of Public Education, University and Research.

### New trends in food consumption

In Europe, the past century was marked by profound transformations in food market and

industry. Although industrialisation in food production dated back to the nineteenth century, with the invention of preserved canned food, food mass-production became a common reality only since the 1950s (Petrick, 2012). Thus, the foodscape was still mainly based on proximity both for production and sale, with a substantial presence of local varieties of crops and animals (Grimaldi, 2012). Since the 1960s the landscape changed (Capatti et al., 1998). Western countries overcame the food shortages that still marked the 1950s, also thanks to the technical and technological transformations in agriculture. Moreover, the diffusion of supermarkets as well as the success of mass-produced goods driven by new forms of marketing, and the rise of living and wage standards imposed a new form of consumption (Clapp, 2012). In particular, industrial products were not just fashionable and cheaper but they were perceived as more safe and trustworthy (Roberts, 2006) than traditional, artisanal productions.

Those are the premises that in thirty years, led to redefine the foodscape. In particular, industrial products played a pivotal role in the market in so far as scholars had spoken of globalisation and standardization of taste (e.g. Bégin, 2016). Following and driving a public scarcely interested in tasting local and artisanal products, the identification between profitability and productivity was established. However, a new understanding started to take shape in the late 1980s. While the first signs of this inclination emerged in the wine industry in the early ‘70s, when European legislation about origin certification was designed and enforced (Addor & Grazioli, 2002), it is only ten years later that a new attention towards local products started spreading. In particular, a key hotbed for the change was Italy, where the history of this understanding has been deeply tied to the one of a grassroot movement: Slow Food. Further information about this movement is provided in the next paragraph.

The past three decades detailed a new attitude towards food. Political debates, media and public opinion nowadays appear more interested in the quality of products, their methods of production, the origin, and the ethical and environ-

mental footprint (Corvo, 2015): “a new attention that appears to challenge the once hegemony of commercial, mass-production”. While market is still dominated by practices of mass-consumption and processed industrial food is a ubiquitous presence in the foodscape (Guptill et al., 2016), the new trend spurs a new understanding for the economic possibilities and challenges for agriculture. In a landscape where over 30% Europeans prefer organic products (Russo, 2017), profitability does not appear any longer as a function correlated only to quantity production. The opening of new market niches suggests the relevance of alternative production methods (such as biodynamic, and organic methods), traditional products, ancient varieties and breeds. Thus, quality and specificity turn to be fundamental in structuring new forms of agriculture the success of which is not based on the extension of cultivated land, nor on mechanization, rather on the attention for the process of valorisation that can be built around those products. In this respect, as a functional example for farmer communities that want to approach a production shift, this paper presents one of the most successful system implemented by Slow Food.

### Slow Food and its system of valorisation

Slow Food was established in Italy in 1989. It expanded the example provided by other associations and editorial activities, such as Arci-Gola (Petrini, 2003), La Gola (Crespi, 2016) and Gambero Rosso. In the course of thirty

years, it expanded into a global grassroots organization with over 100,000 members and 1,500 local chapters in 160 countries.

The movement originated as a reaction to the diffusion of fast-food culture in the West, in particular in Italy. This alimentary culture was perceived as an agent of transformation that was eroding local food culture and in particular local cultural and biological diversity, because it was imposing standardized taste and products following that path that Ritzer (1998) terms “McDonaldization”. While a protest against the opening of a McDonald’s restaurant in the hearth of Rome was the first public action of the movement, in the course of the years it expanded its approach, both under a theoretical and a practical perspective. From being a movement “against” something, it evolved developing its advocacy for local farmer communities and local productions. In particular, the movement advocates and promotes food that is “good”, that is tasty and at the same time healthy, “clean”, with a low environmental impact, and “fair”, whose price respects and remunerates the work of those who produce, process and distribute it. Since the early 2000s, “Good, Clean, and Fair” has been the main motto of Slow Food (Petrini, 2007). More recently, the political platform has been expanded encompassing elements more concerning in detail themes such as food sovereignty (Petrini, 2009) and civil rights of farmer communities (Petrini, 2013).

Besides the important theoretical contribution to the field of food understanding

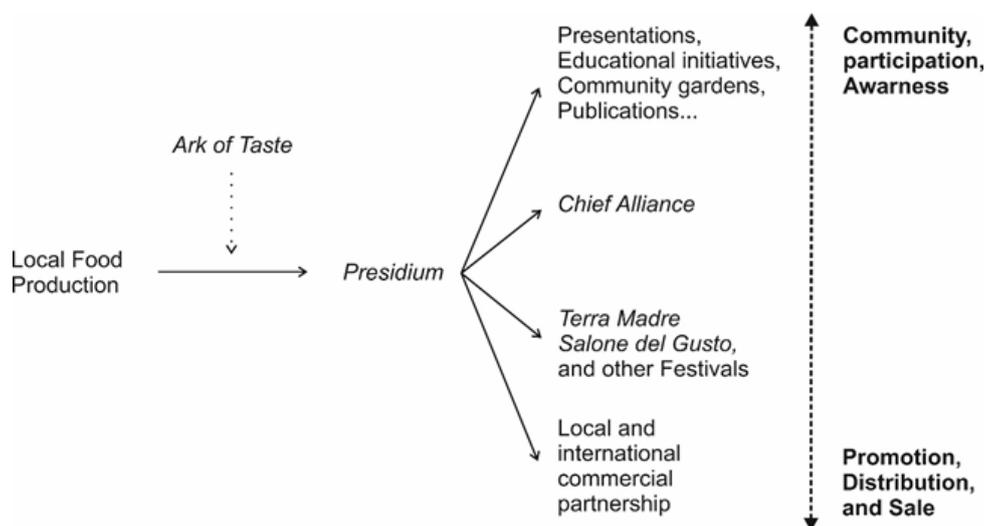


Figure 1. The system of valorisation of Slow Food

(Wexler, Oberlander, & Shankar, 2017), the movement gave a relevant contribution in designing and activating a system of valorization that encompasses all the actors involved in food production and consumption: farmers, transformers, chefs, dealers, consumers; a vast group of subjects that the movement terms “food community” (Figure 1. System outline).

The system starts from a local area and its productions. Slow Food focuses its attention on the promotion of local, traditional foods. In particular, it looks at productions that have lost social relevance and distribution becoming neglected and marginal in the production and consumption foodscape. The development model starts from those products and those producers that still produce them.

The first action is linked with its mapping and assessment: the animal and vegetable varieties as well as the methods of productions are recorded. In case the production is endangered of extinction, because only a few producers are left or the social and environmental transformations of the local milieu outline the possible risk that its production may stop, the product can be enlisted in the Ark of Taste (Zocchi, 2017). It is a catalogue of endangered quality food products deeply rooted in local culture. The Ark enlists different products, such as animal breeds, vegetable varieties, preserves and cheeses, producing a first resource for preserving the memory of the endangered products and promoting their making. At the moment, December 2017, the Ark presents over 4600 products from over 140 countries (<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/>)

From this first analysis the valorisation system proceeds by involving local producers. Slow Food engages them to compile a “production protocol” that codifies the specificity of the product, its methods of cultivation, breeding or production and require producers to reduce and eliminate “chemical treatments, use methods that respect animal welfare; defend native breeds and local vegetable varieties; use ecological packaging where possible; and favour the use of renewable energy” (Nano et al., 2017). The protocol is at the basis of the constitution of a

Presidium. Each Presidium is an association of small-scale producers that supports specific quality productions at risk of extinction; protects local human and natural landscape, recovers traditional processing methods; and safeguards native breeds and local plant varieties (Nano et al., 2017). In order to join the Presidium, producers must accept the “production protocol” and in so doing they can brand their product with the name of the specific Presidium. Moreover, they can receive technical assistance from the Presidium to improve production quality, identify new market outlets and organize exchanges with producers internationally through the large Slow Food events. There are over 500 Presidia around the world that involve over 13.000 producers (<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/en/what-we-do/slow-food-presidia/>). Presidia are the fundamental element in the action of the movement (Siniscalchi, 2013). Each Presidium can organize its own activities, such as tasting, presentations, participation to local, national and international fairs, publishing promotional materials, conducting or supporting research. However, they can join campaigns and events promoted by Slow Food aimed at the promotion of local production. Such actions have different objectives but overall, they can be places in a continuum recognizing in them more an aspect of community participation and awareness raising, or a commercial purpose.

In this continuum we recognize first of all the local activities of the Presidium. They are aimed at the local community and those consumers that can access the area. They encompass communication and educative initiatives. In this respect, Slow Food promotes and produces internationally marketed publications, such as guides and researches that present and promote the small-scale productions, in particular the one of the Presidia (<http://www.slowfoodeditore.it/>). It also develops specific educational formats, such as the Masters of Taste (<http://www.slowfood.it/educazione/master-of-food-slowfood/>), launched in 2001. Those are training sessions aimed at answering the demand of a public of consumers interested in discovering the characteristics of specific productions or typologies of products,

their history and culture. Other activities encompasses the organization of local community gardens (<http://www.slowfood.it/educazione/orto-in-condotta/>), and the involvement with local schools.

Slow Food has played a fundamental role in reconnecting food producers with the other actors of the food chain. In particular, it established a strong link between Presidium's producers and chefs. While numerous restaurateurs participate in Slow Food, in 2009, the movement establishes the "chef alliance". This is a network of chefs that choose to source their ingredients from Presidia and local food producers. The chefs, thus, become actors of the promotion and dissemination of the products. Moreover, they are engaged in interpreting and improving the production, thus creating a dynamic interface between producers and consumers. About 1000 restaurants in the world are part of the network in 2017 (<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/en/what-we-do/slow-food-chefs-alliance/the-project/>)

Slow Food organizes national and international fairs open to Presidia' producers. The most important one is "Terra Madre – Salone del Gusto" (<http://www.salonedelgusto.com/>). The event was launched for the first time in 1996 as the first Italian fair of local high-quality food products. Since then, it has been organized biennially in Turin expanding its range and impact and becoming one of the world's most important events dedicated to small-scale food producers. While in 2004 Slow Food launched "Terra Madre" (<https://www.terramadre.info>) the biennial international meeting of all the food communities in the world linked to Slow Food (Petrini, 2009), since 2012 the Salone and Terra Madre were united into a single event that presents an extraordinary selection of good, clean and fair food from all around the globe. The 2016 edition attracted about one million visitors: a figure that easily expresses the impact of the initiative.

Similarly to "Terra Madre – Salone del Gusto", Slow Food organizes other events. They encompass "Cheese" (<http://cheese.slowfood.it>), a biennial international fair held in Bra for dairy artisans, "Slow Fish" (<http://slowfish.slowfood.it>),

a biennial international festival held in Genoa that involves academics, researchers, small-scale fishing activities, "Indigenous Terra Madre" (<https://www.terramadre.info>), events co-organized with indigenous peoples' communities and hosted in their territories, "Slow Meat" (<https://www.slowfoodusa.org/slow-meat>), a biennial event organized by Slow Food USA that involves breeders, farmers, butchers, cooks, consumers, and experts to share ideas on sustainable meat production. All these events are opportunities for local producers to presents their product to a vast public and establish commercial relationship and collaborations with other small-scale producers raising the awareness about their products and strengthening their economic and social capital.

Slow Food then promotes other activities aimed at enhancing the commercial activity of the Presidia. One example is the "Narrative Label", launched in 2011. This "counter-label" is used for Presidia products and aims at giving more information on varieties and breeds, on farming and processing techniques, on the areas from where the product originates, on animal welfare and culinary preparation of the product; all elements aimed at addressing the possible doubts of consumers and at offering them hints and tips for improving their culinary skills (<http://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/en/our-themes/whatis-the-narrative-label/>).

## DISCUSSION

Slow Food, with its Presidia and initiatives, developed an integrated system of valorisation capable of sustaining small-scale production. The model anticipated the transformation of the market and the rising attention towards quality food and was able to foster those social and economic competences, skills and arrangements that enable local communities that valorise their production. In particular, this model is not just a system of promotion, it affects ten different aspects concerning supply, demand and infrastructure:

- It counters the fragmentation of the supply, aggregating small-scale producers in local associations.

- It provides them with an established and recognizable brand with a strong identity.
- It fosters a self, grass-root, transparent regulation of production.
- It provides tools for the trackability of products and productions.
- It improves the possibilities for professional development of producers.
- It supports the social recognition of the role played by small-scale producers.
- It ushers the creation of national and international networks of producers and consumers.
- It creates communities around the different Presidia.
- It expands the market creating new events and occasions for exchange.
- It promotes initiatives aimed at enriching the gastronomic knowledge and skills of consumers

This system is particularly interesting because it can promote small-scale production working not only on the more conventional economic factors of availability and price. Instead, it works first of all on social level, by strengthening the producers' confidence, by organizing themselves in associations, and by improving product culture among producers and consumers. In so doing, also the local production itself ends to be re-embedded into the hotbed of practices of society while mass consumption drives it to abandonment. Thus, over all, it creates the pre-suppositions required to increase the value and the level of innovation of small-scale, traditional productions, which is to reinforce the resilience of producers and productions in a context of a globalised market.

In this respect, Slow Food appears a model to be understood and implemented, in particular to give answers to an impoverishing rural class that is unable to cope with a model of business based on extensive production risks to be driven to abandon its areas. It points out there is a positive future for small-producers and to those who want to cultivate and breed local, ancient varieties. It is a model that requires investments, not in land and machineries, but in education, communication and sociality. This model is spun by private initiative that is supported and

supports the activity of countries aimed at food security and regulation. In this respect, it can also be considered a possible example for a positive equilibrium between private and public intervention; a fundamental element to build a better and more human economy.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Numerous people offered precious intellectual and moral support during fieldwork and writing this article. In particular, I want to thank Mohammad S. Allahyari, Paolo Corvo, and Andrea Pieroni, for their valuable help and suggestions at various stages of this work, and the editors of IJAMAD for providing stimulating feedback that helped me to reinforce my arguments.

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**How to cite this article:**

Filippo Fontefrancesco, M. (2018). The slow food model: A road for small-scale productions in a globalised market. *International Journal of Agricultural Management and Development*, 8(1), 17-23.

URL: [http://ijamad.iaurasht.ac.ir/article\\_537497\\_ed182c8e5f09c53cebb599b6abdca231.pdf](http://ijamad.iaurasht.ac.ir/article_537497_ed182c8e5f09c53cebb599b6abdca231.pdf)

