

Social Sustainability of Typical Food between Company Commitment and Stakeholder Engagement.

An experimental case

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Stakeholder engagement is now a crucial issue both for Business Ethics scholars and for those who, within Corporations and Institutions, are responsible for establishing policies, practices and stakeholders-oriented procedures.

The centrality of stakeholder engagement is unanimous and its importance in the scientific debate is also demonstrated by relevant cases histories and numerous contributions such as those that animate this special issue of *Notizie di Politeia*. However, as often happens, the success of the “concept” is not followed by an adequate clarity about its meaning.

In fact, by examining the essays in this journal (which all undoubtedly underline the centrality mentioned before), it is clear that what they share is precisely the variety of meanings related to the idea of stakeholder engagement, and not the ability to define a clear identity.

Thus, in the stakeholder engagement can be legitimately included – and the list is not exhaustive – business strategies, organizational practices, internal communications activities, moments of information / training reserved to groups of stakeholders, positive actions of companies and / or of other stakeholders, cooperative agreements, and so on.

Moreover, this complexity is not only caused by the variety of meanings, but also by the quality of what is gradually considered as stakeholders engagement; in fact, under the same label we can find very different activities, whose performances, to increase the complexity of the framework, are usually measured by different, extemporaneous and not formalized methods.

The vagueness about what actually is the stakeholder engagement with a good chance can be defined as a “disease of growth”; however, the problem is not a marginal one if even the Corporations with are more responsive and equipped with regards to stakeholder thinking are not yet ready in this respect (Manetti, 2011).

Without going into that in detail, we can still detect that Stakeholder Engagement is observable both in terms of strategies and in terms of behaviours, i.e. the actions that are taken by the various stakeholders involved on the basis of specific business choices.

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This aspect is very important; in other words, there can only be stakeholder engagement if there is some form of commitment by Organizations and Corporations. These two areas seem connected by a relationship of direct proportionality, so we can well suppose that an increase of the first leads to an increase of the latter.

If the relationship between commitment and “involvement” can be developed in terms of human rights and social justice, the same cannot be said for the micro-sociological dimensions of business actions (Swedberg, 2003). As is well-known, the actions that form the basic model of capitalist economy are production, distribution, consumption and profit; it is easy to see that consumption is the area where the business commitment is intrinsic, but is also the one where, for the pursuit of sustainable forms of economic behaviour, responsibility and, therefore, engagement (not limited to consumer) are, so to speak, structural.

This is evident in reciprocity as a system of resource allocation, in respect of which Karl Polanyi is still the reference (1944); the act of consumption is embedded in social relations (and hence its rationality can be seen from the behaviours, certainly very diverse and polymorphic, that can be linked to idea of engagement). But this consideration also applies to “competitive markets” (Ingham, 2008); even in the more globalized ones, characterized by a high marketness, it is unthinkable that the consumption relationship can develop without mechanisms of reciprocity (commitment-engagement) of the actors involved.

Ultimately, consumption is the “ideal place” – both conceptual and real – where we can observe, measure, assess the concrete existence of stakeholder engagement, along with other ethical dimensions of consumption in a market economy (Bray, Johns, Kilburn, 2011).

Social sustainability as a concern for the stakeholder community

The aim of this paper¹ is to present an empirical study. It’s an operative definition of the social sustainability of typical² food products, structured on the basis of the commitment-engagement relationship mentioned before.

The work is part of a broader research that aims at defining a multidimensional index of sustainability of food products, by means of a self assessment procedure designed for small and medium food companies³. This instrument seems appropriate for three reasons:

1. The existence of untold number of standards can be difficult to interpret, and the presence of an increasing range of certification without adequate consumer knowledge, has generated confusion for consumers. This uncertainty means that consumers do not therefore take these standards into account when making their purchases;
2. The demand for a “return to the past”, namely consumers’ desire to rediscover historic products connected to the traditional cuisine of a given area, representing an innate tourist attraction for the area, but also a cause for greater attachment to the area among those who live there and exhibit an increasing desire to

rediscover time-honoured traditions and products;

3. Safeguarding the environment and landscape. With reference to the most widely used voluntary certification systems, and product standards in particular, often these are only relatively successful, due to bureaucratic problems and a poor market response. These voluntary systems of process certification (i.e. Iso14001, Emas, Iso8000 or Iso26000) implemented by local bodies, guarantee control of environmental aspects, but do not offer the overall vision captured, albeit in different ways, by those who live in an area, and those who occasionally visit it.

In this sense, what we propose is not a “new” certification model, nor a “new” quality mark, nor a tool for strategic marketing; it is rather the attempt to consider together the different dimensions of sustainability in order to define a different idea of food “quality”.

The methodology for the definition of the tool implies:

- determining the characteristics of the index, the geographical area of application and the products/ reference categories, and identifying basic concepts;
- establishing fixed and variable criteria and control mechanisms;
- applying the index to a set of typical food products to test its validity;
- generalization of the index, in order to use it with products from other regions.

The potential impact of this work are numerous: as well as an increased attention with respect to “sustainable consumption”, there is the possibility for companies to have an agile and friendly self-assessment tool. The results can become the basis for a new way of understanding the customer-supplier business relationship and in general the social role of food businesses.

At the end of the first phase (scheduled for June 2012), companies will be offered a tool of business planning and new methods of product valorisation, with the aim of decreasing the negative impacts of production and encouraging the consumer/co-producer (Petrini, 2009) towards conscious choices.

The dimensions of analysis considered during the trials are numerous:

- environmental sustainability of the product, measured through a LCA (Life Cycle Assessment) evaluation, which considers the entire life cycle including pre-production (and therefore extraction and production of materials), production, distribution, use (and therefore reuse and maintenance), recycling and final disposal;
- environmental sustainability of packaging, which is part of the product and affects its image. Good packaging brings all the information required in order for the product to be recognized and identified, approached and used properly, fulfilling functional and environmental needs;
- the economic sustainability of the product, which considers the interaction between businesses and the territory, and the financial sustainability of the various stages of production, distribution, sale and consumption;
- analysis of the intrinsic qualities of the product, with its characteristics (appearance, aroma, taste, flavour, texture and sound) perceived through the senses (sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing). For food products, these aspects represent the main elements of characterization because they are able to express

- the link with the territory; and
- the social sustainability of the product, specific object of this paper.

Social (weak) sustainability: a definition

This paper deals with the “social” dimension of sustainability of traditional food products, an aspects with an increasing importance, especially since the introduction of “Agenda 21”.

The acceptance of a multi-dimensional idea of sustainability has now made the mono-dimensional model obsolete. Today, when talking about sustainability, we refer to the so-called Three Pillar Model (or Triple Bottom Line – TBL), which assumes that development must be sustainable with reference to two other dimensions: economic and social. We must then consider three fundamental aspects: society, economy and the environment (Elkington, 1998).

According to the general idea of sustainability, coupled with its multidimensional nature, any human activity should become “sustainable”, including the production of foodstuffs regarding both dimensions of Quantity and Quality of the productions. In this perspective, of course, sustainability can only be understood in its weak sense (think of the production of food of animal origin, obviously unsustainable for the animals turned into “product”!).

Many people criticized the idea of “weak sustainability”; in particular, representatives of environmental fundamentalism, according to whom the concept is based on the ambiguity of the equivalence between development and growth, and totally ignores the existence of ecological limits. Gilbert Rist (1996) considers sustainable development as a capitalist hoax: “It calms the fears caused by the effects of economic growth in order to prevent a radical questioning. Even if the lure is attractive, we should not be fooled: what the system wants to protect is development, and not the capacity of the ecosystem or society to bear it”.

In fact, if we consider sustainability in its strong sense, it is unthinkable that it can be combined with development in its capitalist perspective. Nevertheless, sustainability (usually designated as “weak” or “very weak”) has established itself as a key element in contemporary thought.

The need to combine production and environmental protection, considering the different aspects of sustainability, appears to be today the central issue of sustainability. If we consider that in this concept we find issues such as the development of third-world countries, the right to use their own resources, civil participation and so on, it is easy to understand its socio-political importance.

In particular, accepting the existence of a “social responsibility” of economic actions and their results means accepting the existence of a “moral responsibility” of actors towards the environment and natural resources. In this respect, there are three main reasons that justify the consequences of economic action with respect to the environment.

The first refers to utilitarian theories, that define individual rights to use natural

resources for the interest of the whole community: an environment a little more degraded in exchange for greater prosperity for mankind.

The second argument refers to ecological fundamentalism, that assigns to natural environment specific rights that others should respect. The environment itself is seen as a moral subject, and rights to use the environment are replaced by rights of the environment as such. This position took shape in the passage from an emotional environmentalism, typical of the Sixties, to more complex forms of reflection that have gradually turned our attention to global and political aspects of environmental issues. These forms of ecological fundamentalism are well represented by Aerne Naess' "deep ecology" theory, that aims at replacing the dominant anthropocentric orientation (which determines the so-called "shallow ecology") with a eco-centric orientation which subordinates human interests to the ones of the ecosystems. This is, roughly, the idea of William Catton and Riley Dunlap (1979) when they spoke of the need to define a new paradigm for interpretation called New Environmental Paradigm (NEP).

Finally, the third argument comes from John Rawls' theory of justice, that assumes the existence of an absolute duty to protect the environment as a collective good (Rawls, 1971). From the reflexivity of Justice, follows an equality of rights and duties towards the environment for all moral subjects (including future ones). John Rawls said that before choosing the principles that should govern a society, we should imagine the point of view of an actor who is completely unaware of the position it occupies within the same, i.e. someone who has not a clue on their place of birth or social status or capabilities and opportunities which life can give him. By doing so, you get to choose a world in which social and economic disparities are arranged so as to create the greatest possible benefit to the most disadvantaged; following this model, which is based on the idea of reflexive justice, the result would be a "socially fair world".

Social sustainability therefore refers to issues of social equity between individuals, between groups and between wider social aggregates. Talking about the social dimensions of sustainability means accepting the idea that sustainable is that which is determined by the mutual dependence of various actors who have a legitimate interest in the use of certain resources; in this case the reference to cultural relativism and interpretative models developed by Mary Douglas is clear (Douglas, 1992).

Similarly, the so-called stakeholder theory is useful to translate the abstract concept of social sustainability in business practices and, consequently, measurable indicators. In accordance with the theory's principle of interdependence between the various claimants, we can say that the sustainability of an action depends on the subjects whose legitimate interests are at stake in the action (Freeman, 1984).

However, in terms of environmental resources, the matter is further complicated when one considers that some stakeholders are excluded from the use of a good or product, such as animals or other living plants and people from future generations.

The Stakeholder Theory suggests that in order to be sustainable, development must be based primarily on the active participation of stakeholders and based on the

forms of “deliberative democracy” well described by John Elster (1998).

Moreover, thanks to the contributions of cultural relativism, we can detect an epistemological dimension of sustainability (defined as cultural sustainability), concerning cultural patterns and current of thought that underlie the environmental issue in different social contexts; this aspect is very important with regard to the taboos and dietary habits and, consequently, the sustainability of a food product.

The quality of life, concrete expression of “culture” in its anthropological sense, is in fact closely related to participation (considered in its various forms) of the members of a community. This Four Pillar Model recognizes that the contribution of culture in creating a vibrant community where people want to live, work or want to visit is of great importance in creating more sustainable patterns of existence (Hawkes, 2001).

It is evident that the possibility of creating a sustainable future depends on the “culture of production” and the “consumer culture” and the way in which these regulatory models are altered and adapted to the changing socio-political and socio-economic context.

We can then give a “complex” definition of social sustainability, where some elements are given priority over others, such as cultural identity, independence (as a self-reliance) and social justice as defined by Rawls.

At an institutional level, the importance of culture as a “fourth pillar” of sustainable development has been underlined in Agenda 21 for Culture. In particular, the second principle of the document states that: “There are clear political similarities between cultural and ecological issues, to the point that both are considered common property of mankind. The ecological concern stems from the consideration of the existence of an economic development model that produces an excessive looting of natural resources and common goods of humanity [...] cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature”.

Social sustainability of food products – can it exist?

The main objective of this paper is therefore a reflection on traditional food products, in order to define the area where their social sustainability is expressed (in the sense of social responsibility towards the various stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in the processes of production, distribution and consumption).

Typical food products (i.e. with some positive features connected to the places and traditions of production and consumption) are one of the most important characterizations in contemporary models of consumption: thanks to typical products, many “places” are identified and base their success on the “staging” of folklore, even in parallel, but not secondary markets (such as tourism) (Savoja, 2009).

The dynamics that govern these transformations are very articulate and imply not only the producers but also the local community, because of the well-known process of commodisation that products must undergo in order to be sold to a wider audience

(Cohen, 1988).

The staging of a typical product is therefore a complex and delicate path, as on one hand we must avoid the risk of trivialization of its most distinctive characteristics (and the consequent loss of the commercial value) and, on the other, it needs to undergo a process of “ownership” by consumers, changing, according to their habits and needs, in shape, size, colour, patterns of consumption and, sometimes, taste.

This process of “commercial standardization of typical products” is full of contradictions and determines important consequences.

The first element we need to consider is the hegemony of producers in the definition of what is “good” (i.e. what can be highlighted to suit the taste of the consumers) between sensory and aesthetic aspects of typical food products.

As is well-known, the purchase and consumption of local products are related, in large part, to the purchase and consumption of a mixture of “parallel products” coming from the material and immaterial cultural heritage of a place. Within this process of appropriation of the product, normally the local community is not sufficiently integrated, and its “voice” disappears in the clamour of consumption. The marginality of the locals is caused on one side by a number of weaknesses in terms of social citizenship of the groups that form the various “souls” of the community, and on the other side from the non-inclusion, or lack of consideration, of the opinion of the local community in the processes of social construction of “good”.

In order for a product to be attractive, this should be considered “good” by external consumers through the mediation of the producers, and this usually happens without the participation of ‘local’ consumers (which in most cases are the same producers). So the “good because it is typical” which is functional to the market cannot match the “good because it is typical” of the local community, which is in a doubly subordinate position: first, it has to satisfy the commercial claim of “good”, as this makes it possible to trigger an economic relationship in which they are interested (even if they are not always the protagonists), and secondly, the locals are forced to conform to the patterns of consumption suggested by ‘external’ customers in order to adhere to the new myths of modernity.

The good quality of a typical products is not always “good in itself” but in most cases turns out to be “good for itself”, that is it becomes a “product worthy of attention when it is socially ratified in markets where customers and locals that live in the territory where the product is made are rarely the protagonists”.

In modern consumption patterns, the assertion of a typical food product is the result of a strong competition in which similar products that aspire to the same goal are compared with each other on the basis of characteristics that have little to do with the characteristics of cultures that express them and that they represent. Their success is not due to their consideration as “unique” and “faithful” products, but above all it is their “cultural legitimacy”, guaranteed by increasingly sophisticated market mechanisms, the key to success.

As well illustrated by Pierre Bourdieu, every field – including that of food-consumption – is structured as a space formed by intrinsic symbolic capitals that

only a few actors are able to control and use for their own purposes, and for social discrimination goals rather than for protection (Bourdieu, 1997). In this perspective, the question of how we can reconcile the characteristic tendency of post-modern consumption to expand its interests with the need for different groups of consumers that can appreciate more and more specialized offerings remains unsolved.

A contradictory dynamic emerges, where the multiplication of typical products goes side by side with promotion initiatives based on the unique character of the same products (which is ratified by their circulation in limited areas of consumption).

The role of “habitus”, as illustrated by Bourdieu, only partially explains this contradiction, in fact if we assume that typical products gain more value as their features are enhanced by the consumption patterns of the elites, it is clear that the consumption of “popular” and – then – typical is a privileged area where an artificial equality can be expressed. The democratisation achieved by the deployment of traditional food products is virtual, because it rests on the expected customers’ ability to appreciate the products on the basis of a shared and widespread knowledge. On closer inspection however this know-how is reserved to the local community and not to the market.

However, if on the one hand, it is important to point out the prevaricating essence of external consumers about the aesthetic and functional qualities of traditional products, on the other we cannot attributed to the local community, as the bearer of a specific local knowledge, a cultural sovereignty on the same products.

Being typical should not be regarded as a “genetic” characteristics, solely defined by the territorial contiguity; as it is not appropriate that the process of definition of the typical unfolds outside the local culture, it is equally important to point out that the bearers of that culture are not the only ones that can establish the value of the typical and the need for its social return.

To the process of commercial appropriation of the “typical” corresponds a process of its same alienation in the consumption patterns of the locals; it is a multifaceted process that is expressed at different levels and often takes the form of the inclusion of the “new” customers which goes side by side to the actual exclusion of the “old” local customers.

We can then define one of the key issues of social sustainability of food products, represented by the search for models of “conscious consumption”; in other words, the awareness of food consumption should produce what James Coleman (1990) calls “socially distributed resources”. A food product can then be said to be sustainable in a social sense as it avoids the hegemony of ‘external’ customers over the resources of popular culture. This means, however, that a product cannot be called sustainable if, while respecting the environment and minimizing the impact of the production cycle, and so on, it is not sold and consumed together with the local community.

In this case, an effective model of reference is that of direct participation in the mechanisms of construction of the typical, as we need to start thinking about social sustainability of food products starting from the local community.

In general, we need therefore to design and organize, to consider the production as a result of a decision-making process based on deliberative democracy, that is characterized by the opportunity given to individuals (or associations representing them or other stakeholders such as customers, the community of producers, suppliers, and so on) to deal directly with collective goods.

In other words, we need to build a system where sustainability is not only sought for in the protection of environmental resources and the balance of the mechanisms of distribution of wealth, but also in what concerns the quality of the experience of consumption, and, undoubtedly, this is one of the objectives of Poliedro.

Certainly, deliberative democracy as a strategy has some obstacles that we will not take into account in this paper; these obstacles are represented mainly by the possibility of manipulation on the part of the stakeholders who are in advantageous position with regard to information, by the danger of triggering a conflict and exacerbate rather than mitigate the imbalances between local actors because of the permanent marginalization of those who can not (or will not) participate. “Participate and share” are a must since the definition and the “launch” of a typical product; in other words, the cooperative mechanisms of decision as to which local resources can be “marketed” allow a better definition of the availability of the members of the local community (and in exchange for what one can achieve that availability) to lose a part of their “tolls” on local resources, culture, products. This means, in the case of products of popular culture, considering the locals as privileged users and producers of what is made available to the market.

In fact, we should always keep in mind that the transformation of these products threatens the social usufruct that locals have on their use, as the appropriation by other consumers significantly alters their value in use and reconfigures their meaning. In this sense, we can certainly say that the “typical” is a public good, whose use by industry and producers, in order to be sustainable, must be offset by compensation of a different kind. In other words, “sustainable” producers should avoid externalising the costs of the use of the “typical” and bear some forms of social remuneration for its use.

In this regard our proposal considers the concrete actions for the collective welfare of the territory, for the protection of the tradition and for the respect of local markets as key elements of social sustainability.

The typical as a collective good and its protection as a dimension of social sustainability

The central question that this paper tries to analyse, therefore, is related to the opportunity of internalising the cost of the use of the typical and of the regional origin of products (as positive qualities that characterize it and increase its value).

In fact, local products would not be such without the presence of a market of local consumption and expert consumers who know them and use them on the basis of models settled – but not crystallized – in the local culture. The typical is not an

intrinsic quality of products, nor a private good for businesses; it is rather a collective good, “ownership” of local communities and it must be considered as such.

Typical food products are such because they are functional to the uses, tastes and habits of the locals, and only in a second instance because they are attractive for other markets. In increasingly pervasive and global consumption patterns, traditional products can find a space only if they function as a symbolic element that can represent specific social relations.

If local products are an expression of the popular culture of a place, it is worth reflecting on the meaning of this concept. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1983), popular culture is the result of collective learning processes of the folklore as tradition of the place; however, this learning process is different at individual level according to the cultural capital one possesses. Art, literature and a vast array of scientific knowledge of various origin have built in time an idea of what is popular than, when it is used to define a culture, it becomes an alternative to cultured. The universe of popular culture is then represented by everything that is not cultured and is alimeted by several conflicts such as craft versus art, the genuine versus sophisticated, the traditional versus the modern, the local versus the global and so on.

The interest of the market for the “typical product” makes explicit the paradox whereby on the one hand, the local community is the “factory” of the typical, and on the other, the offer of its products is the main factor of transformation (destruction?) of the cultural humus in which popular creativity is created (superstition, ignorance, particularism, and so on).

Thus, the risk of the “typical” as the value of the product is its de-contextualization, that becomes inevitable if the “typical” is made available on the market by presenting, and trivializing, it as the remains of a social structure that is dying out. In this sense, what disappears in certain “sanctuaries” of purchase, are not the authentic products, witnesses of the typical, but rather their ability to define specific cultural universes where the membership of their creators can be traced.

The attention to the output (more and more protected by the use of marks, labels, symbols, and so on), as opposed to the neglect of the “process” and the “actors”, attributes more value to the reproduction than to the “authentic” transformation (as a genuine product belonging to the local culture) of local products. In this way, typical products are “plasticized” to be functional to the processes of expanded consumption, but in this way they deviate from local consumers who, while transforming them constantly, could keep them “alive”.

For this, the social sustainability of a food product can be found in its ability to oppose the definition of a consumption model characterized by the presence of supposedly immutable traditions. On the contrary, it guarantees the “transformation” of these traditions governing the interactions with the modernizing forces that unfold their effects in contemporary social aggregates.

Another warning in respect to the definition of social sustainability is due to the fact that the typical is not a unique feature of the objects and goods.

Cultural anthropology has well illustrated that the folklore is mostly expressed in social relations and interpersonal communication processes. On closer inspection, many products become typical only thanks to the use and meanings that take in the local community; tradition is not then the only factory of the typical, as we need to consider the “daily life” as well. The “typical” of a product is the dynamic representation of the collective experiences of a community, which includes all the above elements but also their transformation.

Finally, we need to point out also that the “typical” is not a monopoly of popular culture. The bond between folklore and lower strata of society is not a pre-condition; in the same way that, from a post-modern view, one person, a consumer, refers to very different patterns of consumption that integrate synchronically and diachronically with various systems of rationality (rural-urban, centre-periphery, mass media-micro-social, real-virtual), even the production of the typical may be hybrid thanks to a combination of contributions from various sectors of society.

Thus the changing markets and mechanisms of sale and consumption of “food” reveal that the typical is not the exclusive territory of a particular social group, nor of narrow areas of agricultural and/or food production, nor of independent artisans; the success of typical food products is also due to the institutions that deal with promotion and enhancement of local resources, the large and small retailers, mass media, private foundations and other actors operating in the region.

We can therefore imagine that the affirmation of the “typical” is the result of a hybrid process that uses resources from various backgrounds, and therefore it is not possible to offer a product with this value only on the basis a complacent melancholy towards the popular tradition. An offer is sustainable because it is able to place local products within the relations linking tradition and modernity.

Next to the preservation of traditions, therefore, there should live a balanced management of the processes of cultural hybridisation that, for example regarding craft products, can be a source of creativity for “new” products, typical for their “unclean” craft, but for this, original. This is what has been defined in an anthropological sense, as “weak hybridisation” (Garcia Canclini, 2001).

In conclusion, in any case a “traditional food product” can be traced into static and authoritarian patterns; but rather, the very definition of its social sustainability directs and subordinates its commercialisation to the legitimate rights of local communities. We should thus facilitate the emergence of an idea of typical not as a guarantee seal with exclusive marketing functions, but in a broader sense, as a mechanism of selection that is based on the past to legitimize the present of communities themselves.

Social sustainability as target for “true” stakeholder engagement

Starting from specific Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) developed by other research groups, we attempted to establish some measurable dimensions to define a satisfactory level of social sustainability of a typical food product. Obviously these

are designed in a concrete way to allow to evaluate both the degree of Company's commitment and the willingness to develop practices of Stakeholder Engagement.

This paper will not address the non-secondary issue of measuring scales. This aspect is still under consideration of the research group both for what concerns the objective quantification of social sustainability and for its comparability with other dimensions of sustainability that already have a set of objective indicators.

While accepting that this problem must be addressed and solved to reach a final definition of Poliedro, in this phase of trial of the companies participating in the research, the indicators of social sustainability were assessed in terms of presence/absence of actions, practices and positive procedures capable of witnessing specific forms of commitment and engagement.

The reference is to the concept of accountability with respect to three categories of main stakeholders: locals, employees/suppliers, consumers⁴.

The general hypothesis against which to consider the accountability of a food product is that if the value of the product is also based on the characteristics of identity, the local community – as holder of the social usufruct with respect to the characteristics of the product – can not be excluded from the benefits generated by its marketing.

Similarly, we must also consider employees/suppliers (as holders of the technical expertise needed) and consumers (as they are available to accept the equation: higher cost = higher sustainability of product) .

Indeed, while the latter two categories of stakeholders are already involved in trade relations and distribution of benefits, the local community is structurally excluded from the value chain.

For accountability, we mean “the need for a company to account for its activity to all its stakeholders”. In order to talk about accountability, it is necessary to have a subject (accountee, in our case the three stakeholders mentioned above), which has some expectations regarding another (accountor, in our case the food product manufacturing company), which is obliged to report on how to response to these expectations.

We can define real “circles of accountability”, whose first step is to identify the subject of accountability between accountee and accountor. Subsequently, the latter realizes what has been planned and reports, producing understandable, complete and accessible information in the so-called model of Stakeholder Management.

The final moment is the evaluation of the accountee: this assessment helps to re-fuel the process, since it is used by the accountor to correct any mistakes and refocus.

The recent ISO 26000 on social responsibility provides a definition of accountability: “an organization should be accountable for its own impacts on society, economy and environment”.

While it is true that the concept of accountability maintains a strong business connotation (linked to the activities of voluntary reporting in favour of stakeholders), today it tends to acquire even an ethical value.

In our research a “socially sustainable typical food product” should promote, and be accountable with respect to:

- acceptance of local cultural models as a guide to consumer behaviour;
- fair return on the use of public goods in production processes;
- respect of social usufruct of the local community in the consumption of products;
- rejection of the logic of the purchase of products based on the best price;
- limitation of the consumption experience as a plus for the consumers and for fairer markets;
- transparency in commercial communications.

In this case, the local community, which often also includes “employees” (since they are small businesses with strong local roots) should be considered at two levels. This stakeholder is to be understood both as “privileged consumer” and top target of a “privileged policy of engagement”. There are many reasons supporting this idea; the first is that typical products would not be such without the presence of a market for local consumption and, secondly, the local community is the best “promoter / producer” of the typical value of that product.

It is therefore relevant to consider the intensity and quality of community participation (her engagement) in the production processes, together with the structure of social relationships that form the “social capital” of the same community.

The indicators for measure social sustainability of the product are builded with regard to these aspects:

- verify the presence/absence of documented positive actions able of creating widespread prosperity (according to some basic parameters of the idea of better quality of life), of promoting fair return for the use of public goods in production processes, of ensuring compliance with the usufruct of the local community with respect to social values that characterize the typical product, of increasing the level of collective participation in the processes of production and distribution;
- verify the presence/absence of documented positive actions with respect to the privileged use of local suppliers, trade fair, the existence of local partnerships as for production and distribution processes, green procurement and ethical procurement;
- Referring only to present consumers, namely those who already buy the product, verify the presence/absence of documented positive actions that promote or improve the chance to live a consumption experience coherent with consumer expectations, indicating in the limitation of consumption a possible positive value, which guarantee maximum accuracy in the commercial communication and are oriented to develop transparent business processes.

Even in the absence of a “definite measure”, the test of the companies participating in the project clearly indicates that the simultaneous presence of actions related to the aspects listed above establishes that the food in question is socially acceptable because its production, distribution, sale and consumption promote the achievement of goals such as:

- generating an adequate local Return of Investment (ROI);

- compliance with the practices of production and consumption of the local culture;
- contrast to the increase in the price of local products due to their protection and, thanks to this, commercial success;
- preservation of the size of local trade markets;
- contrast to the trivialization of the typical during the production, distribution and commercial processes;
- maintenance of “intellectual property” of the attributes of typical as a local asset;
- defense of the nature of the typical as commons;
- education of the various stakeholders involved in issues of social sustainability.

The first phases of our on field experimentations confirms the results reached in other surveys carried out on this theme (Paloviita, 2010): the development of a local sustainable food network requires direct relationships and personal involvement with producers, consumers, employees, residents, social networking, local media communication and institutions.

It is what we have called in this paper “Stakeholder Engagement”. So the degree of involvement of the local community in the creation and promotion of products and, above all, their familiarity in the local patterns of consumption become strategic dimensions of the commercial value of these products and a “real metaphoric place” where find traces of “true” engagement.

Notes

¹ Extended version of the paper: Savoja, L., “Poliedro: a multifaceted index for food sustainability. Social sustainability of agri-food products” presented at the 10th European Sociological Association (ESA) Conference *Social Relations in Turbulent Times*, Geneva, 7-10 September, 2011.

² In this case, “typical” is considered as a synonym of: traditional, authentic, with specific geographical origin, ...

³ POLIEDRO is a self-assessment instrument aimed at evaluating the sustainability of agri-food products, based on the combination of different indicators belonging to the different aspects of sustainability. It is a systemic index that considers the environmental, social, economic, anthropological and organoleptic attributes of a product and of the materials involved in its generation. Its multidimensional character makes it clear that we refer to sustainability in its “weak” sense. The research is led by three Italian Universities (Università di Scienze Gastronomiche di Pollenzo, Università di Torino – Dipartimenti di Economia Aziendale, Scienze Merceologiche, Scienze Sociali e Politecnico di Torino – Dipartimento di Progettazione Architettonica e Disegno Industriale) with the financial support of Regione Piemonte. The work is led through a direct experience with some companies, actively involved in the research. These are medium and small Piedmontese producers, which produce typical food products. Testing and application of the index are Referred to three categories: Chocolate & Sweets, Alcoholic beverages & wines, Meat & sausages; 6 different Companies are directly involved in the trial. More details on <http://www.regione.piemonte.it/innovazione/ricerca/bandi-e-finanziamenti/bandi-aperti/bando-scienze-umane-e-sociali.html>

⁴ In this case the stakeholder are defined in the same way used on *ISO26000. Guidance on social responsibility* (Iso, 2010).

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