



Local Environment

The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability

ISSN: 1354-9839 (Print) 1469-6711 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cloe20>

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To cite this article: Evelien de Hoop & Petr Jehlička (2017) Reluctant pioneers in the European periphery? Environmental activism, food consumption and “growing your own”, *Local Environment*, 22:7, 809-824, DOI: [10.1080/13549839.2017.1289160](https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1289160)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1289160>



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Published online: 08 Feb 2017.



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Reluctant pioneers in the European periphery? Environmental activism, food consumption and “growing your own”

Evelien de Hoop ^a and Petr Jehlička ^{b,c}

^aDepartment of Innovation, Environmental and Energy Sciences, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands;

^bDepartment of Geography, Faculty of Arts and social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK;

^cDepartment of Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

East European food self-provisioning (FSP) has fascinated scholars of post-socialism ever since the early 1990s. In keeping with its predominantly economic and cultural conceptualisations, much of this research has been concerned with FSP's role in household economy and with the social profile of its practitioners. In contrast to western conceptualisations of FSP as an opportunity to expand food activism and foster social justice and environmental sustainability, post-socialist FSP has rarely been considered as such. In Czechia, FSP is practised by 43% of citizens and many of them do so in a relatively environmentally friendly way. Yet, most food-related campaigns run by environmental NGOs (ENGOS) pay little attention to FSP and focus on market-based ethical consumerism and alternative food networks instead. Using insights from actor-network theory, this paper discusses how Czech ENGO activists engage with FSP through discourse and in practice. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with leading activists, we show that FSP does figure in non-food-related campaigns and that the FSP practised by activists themselves or the FSP carried out by relatives and relatives' friends are not the same as the FSP on which they are reluctant to campaign. These differences, which include controllability and the time-consuming nature of practising FSP according to some of the activists' ideals, help this paper to come to an initial understanding of why Czech ENGOS do not run campaigns explicitly focused on FSP at the moment and shed some light on how this could change in the future.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 September 2016

Accepted 23 January 2017



KEYWORDS

Home gardening; urban agriculture; environmental NGOs; food activism; ethical consumption

So as far as local [production] is concerned ... those vegetable growers [...] are very active ... But they aren't, obviously ... it is nothing organic, they use sprays, pesticides and herbicides ... this practice existed during the communist period, it was ... it was referred to at that time as an escape from communism, from the regime, people escaped to their countryside cabins and cottages, to their allotments. (Quote from a research interview with an activist from ENGO Veronica, 14 September 2011, translated from Czech)

1. Introduction

Alternative food movements are gaining momentum (Kneafsey *et al.* 2008, Goodman *et al.* 2014, Schlosberg and Coles 2016). Food activists claim that various forms of alternative food networks

CONTACT Evelien de Hoop  e.dehoop@uu.nl  Department of Innovation, Environmental and Energy Sciences, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 2, 3584 CS Utrecht, Netherlands

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(AFNs) – farmers’ markets, box schemes, community-supported agriculture, direct sales from farms’ yards – form important sites of transformative action regarding the food system by reconnecting production and consumption and embedding them in localised social relations (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013, Balázs *et al.* 2016). Proponents of food relocalisation ranging from global actors such as Slow Food to a wealth of national and local food activist movements and groups extol the contributions of AFNs to public health, environmental sustainability, social cohesion and fostering community (Lamine 2015, Williams *et al.* 2015). Somewhat surprisingly, until recently, a widespread variant of AFNs – home gardening¹ (also referred to as household/domestic food production, growing your own or food self-provisioning [FSP]) – that could arguably be viewed as the most radical form of AFNs (due to its most profound reconnection and social embedding of food production and consumption) has largely escaped the attention of the alternative food movements, partly because of their predominant focus on market-based innovations (Lamine 2015, Williams *et al.* 2015).

Food scholarship has paid equally limited attention to FSP (Schupp *et al.* 2015). Taylor and Taylor Lovell’s (2014, p. 285) “manifesto for the study of home gardens in the Global North” as well as exploratory research into the social base of this form of AFNs (Schupp and Sharp 2012), the barriers to its diffusion (Schupp *et al.* 2015), its environmental sustainability dimensions and its contributions to equity and social justice (Jehlička and Smith 2011, Turner 2011, Smith and Jehlička 2013, 2015) have occurred only in the last five years.

To the best of our knowledge, an important research area of FSP that has remained unexplored by scholars is the relationship between alternative food activists, environmental movements and FSP. In addition to the noticeable dearth of scholarly literature engaging with this relationship, our interest in this issue has been sparked by personal experience of the non-Czech co-author of this paper. About 10 years before the date of the interview from which the quotation used at the beginning of this paper was extracted, the non-Czech co-author joined a Czech family on a visit to their weekend house to pick sour cherries in their garden and to process these into jam. She was struck by the way this practice of food growing, harvesting, processing, storing and also consuming formed an integral part of these people’s lives. And not only of this family’s life, but also that of many other people she met on the trip. Furthermore, while this family dismissed the co-author’s interest in organic food as purposelessly expensive, they found it completely self-evident not to use “chemicals” for their own crops unless they faced a serious direct risk of the crop being exposed to diseases or insects. They also told me that while almost every Czech, rich and poor, had access to a small piece of land one way or the other, many could not afford to feed their families with certified organic food. This raised important preliminary insights with regard to the relationships between equity, FSP and certified organic food. In contrast to this experience, brief conversations that took place five years later with an activist from environmental NGO (ENGO) Hnutí Duha centred entirely around the movement’s attempts to promote organic food consumption. The subsequent exploration of Czech ENGOs’ websites dedicated to food activism suggested that their activism was aimed at what in the Czech context were marginal (in terms of volumes of food) forms of alternative food consumption, such as organic food, farmers’ markets and fair-trade goods.²

International scholarship’s blind spot concerning the relationship between food activism and FSP and the puzzle of counterintuitive – to us, the authors of this paper – attitudes of Czech alternative food activists to FSP raised our curiosity and desire for a deeper understanding of these activists’ ideas and practices. This paper is concerned with the complexity and ambiguity of alternative food activists’ relationships with FSP and draws on a few sensitivities taken from actor-network theory (ANT). These sensitivities, particularly the importance of non-humans and distributed agency, are useful to study how discourse and material reality come about together through the concerted actions of humans and non-humans. By doing so, we seek to document how these alternative food activists relate to FSP through discourse and practice as well as understand how those relationships come about. The Czech social context – with nearly half of the population involved in this form

of alternative food production and consumption – is particularly suitable for this investigation (Smith and Jehlička 2013, Smith *et al.* 2015).

To carry out this investigation, we take a two-pronged approach. First of all, we focus on both historical and contemporary discourses of ENGOs on food to see how Czech ENGOs present themselves in relation to FSP. Secondly, following Sin (2014) in highlighting the importance of studying how people “do” abstract concepts, we study how Czech activists engage with FSP in various ways in practice based on the idea that “doing” FSP involves much more than its discourse may suggest. This approach brings important differences between doing various kinds of FSP to the fore, allowing us to understand Czech environmental activists’ hesitations to promote FSP in the way they promote significantly less localised and socially less equitable forms of AFNs such as farmers’ markets and organic food.

We begin by exploring the literature on food activism and on FSP. We then introduce our theoretical approach. After a brief description of our methodology, we discuss how ENGOs presented themselves discursively in relation to food and FSP based on a historical analysis of the environmental magazine *Sedmá generace* (Seventh Generation). Subsequently, we reflect on ENGOs’ discursive engagements with FSP in interviews followed by a discussion of ENGOs’ FSP-related practices. Lastly, we show how our presence in the field matters to this account. The paper concludes that the stance of ENGO activists towards FSP is simultaneously celebratory and dismissive, and that this is informed by the specific socio-materiality of different kinds of FSP.

2. Scholarship on environmental activism and AFNs

Research into western food activism has repeatedly shown that ENGOs play a central role in the creation of new norms concerning food consumption (Pellandini-Simányi 2014), the rise of ethical food consumerism (Barnett *et al.* 2005, Guthman 2007, Klein 2009) and engendering changes in mainstream agri-food systems (Oosterveer 2012). Most of these activities relate to the effort to promote short food supply chains (SFSCs) and AFNs to reduce the environmental impact of food production and consumption, and bringing consumption and production together, a process often referred to as food relocalisation or re-embedding (e.g. Nabhan 2002, Renting *et al.* 2003, Selfa and Qazi 2005, Maxey 2006, Steel 2008, Little *et al.* 2009). In the Western social context, literature on FSP explores a range of questions, including the relative importance of economic versus other motivations for participating in FSP (Teitelbaum and Beckley 2006, Schupp and Sharp 2012), the extent to which FSP can be considered a form of food localism (McEntee 2010, Schupp and Sharp 2012), labour and gender constraints on people’s involvement in FSP (McIntyre and Rondeau 2011), the contribution of FSP to local food security and as a source of nutritious food (Shaw 2006, Kortright and Wakefield 2011) and the role of spatial planning in facilitating and shaping FSP practices (Adams *et al.* 2013).³

While there are clearly important differences between promoting organically certified food and food bought directly from a small farmer, ENGO campaigns on these food alternatives rather than FSP could be criticised as being part of an ongoing process of corporatisation or neoliberalisation within ENGOs: unlike FSP, those food alternatives rely on monetised market transactions (e.g. Jehlička and Smith 2011). At the same time, McClintock (2014) highlights that food justice-oriented urban agriculture in the USA – both in its market- and non-market-based variants – can simultaneously be seen as a radical or reformist alternative and as part of the neoliberal system because it performs tasks in the field of food provisioning for all, that are no longer performed under increasing neoliberalisation of the central or local state.

In contrast to market-based AFNs such as farmers’ markets and direct sales, FSP means growing and consuming one’s own food using one’s own (predominantly non-monetary) resources. As such, and in contrast to social scientists considering western urban agriculture as reinforcing the neoliberal paradigm (McClintock 2014), FSP largely takes place outside the mainstream agri-food systems and can be much less easily viewed as strengthening the existing agri-food system than the food-related topics on which ENGOs have been identified to campaign. While the relationships

between ENGOs and food with explicit reference to a post-socialist setting have received limited attention from researchers [but see Gorlach *et al.* (2008) and Goszczyński and Knieć (2011) for preliminary considerations], there is a considerable body of work carried out in the 1990s which depicted post-socialist FSP in economic terms as a “survival” or “coping” strategy of the poor (e.g. Rose and Tikhomirov 1993, Seeth *et al.* 1998; but also see Alber and Kohler 2008 for a more recent account). Since then, alternative accounts of post-socialist FSP have been advanced that highlight the embeddedness of these practices in social norms of mutual assistance, enhancing social justice (Torsello 2005, Acheson 2007). While still framing these practices in economic terms, these accounts highlight their more culturally inflected entanglements with leisure, food sharing habits and assuming control over one’s diet (Czegledy 2002, Pallot and Nefedova 2003, Smith and Rochovská 2007). However, the political significance of these practices, except for their characterisation as a “coping strategy of the poor under the communist regime”, so far remains unaddressed.

3. Approach

Our approach to the relationships between Czech activists and FSP is largely interpretivist, while drawing on some of ANT’s sensitivities as put forward by Latour (2005) and Mol (2010). ANT especially allows us to bring together our interests in both the discourses of ENGO activists and the materiality of FSP practices. FSP as an object of enquiry is very much a material practice, which means that the roles of non-humans involved matter just like the roles of humans (Power 2005, Taylor and Taylor Lovell 2014). ANT considers the role of both humans (mostly activists, but also other gardeners) and non-humans (the gardens, crops and many more) symmetrically (Mol 2010). Putting humans and non-humans at par is possible if “intentionality” is disregarded because only humans and perhaps some animals are commonly understood as having intentions.

Those humans and non-humans playing a role in FSP practices – referred to in ANT-speak as actants (e.g. Lasen 2010) – do not act individually: the action of each entity is only possible when it is afforded by other entities (Latour 2005, Mol 2010). This means that everything acts in and through networks, through connections with others. These actor-networks are simultaneously singular and plural: a train which is moving looks like it is a moving train (singular), but the action of moving is afforded by a range of other elements, such as the tracks, the electricity supply above the train, the train’s engine, the engine driver and much more (plural) (Callon 1986). Furthermore, entities only exist through action (Latour 2005). Combining the idea that existence requires action with the idea that action is always distributed leads us to the term enactment, which means that reality is brought into being through collective, distributed practice (Mol 2002). The realities created through a variety of practices consist not only of material elements, such as gardens, but also of discourses which people express. Starting from the observation “Czech ENGO activists do not campaign on FSP even though it appears to be a very sustainable practice” may easily lead one into a piece of research that confirms the initial gut feeling that these activists should indeed be frowned upon for not campaigning on FSP. To allow for a narrative that tries to understand rather than judge activists’ stance towards FSP, understanding materiality and discourse as emerging from collective, distributed practice is a useful approach.

4. Research into FSP in the Czech context: the story so far

Recently, post-socialist FSP practices started to be considered in relation to the concept of AFNs (Round *et al.* 2010) and to sustainability (Jehlička and Smith 2011). Indeed, several surveys have been carried out to study the character of FSP practices in relation to sustainability. These surveys present the material characteristics of FSP in Czechia in a specific way as outlined in this section.

In 2010 43% of Czechs self-identified as gardeners growing some of their food for themselves [in contrast, only 4.8% of Czechs regularly bought certified organic food; Green Marketing (2008)]. Based on measurements of production volumes, this work shows that out of the total Czech production of

tomatoes, strawberries, kohlrabi and cucumbers, more than 50% was produced through FSP, with garlic at the top (95% of all garlic production in Czechia takes place through FSP) (Jehlička and Smith 2012). In terms of consumption, FSP accounted for 34% of fresh fruit, 32% of eggs, 27% of potatoes, 24% of lard and 22% of vegetables (Štiková *et al.* 2009). This production (and some of the consumption) took place in three settings: mostly in gardens adjacent to privately owned, permanently occupied houses; on allotments and in the gardens of people's second homes (Jehlička and Smith 2012).

Survey results on the way this gardening is carried out can be compared with AFNs and SFSCs as well as the principles (biospotřebitel.cz, n.d.) of organic food production. Supply chains are extremely short or absent: consumer and producer typically merge into the same entity except when produce is shared within the producer's social circles. Labelling, characteristic of most AFNs, is superfluous. Organic food production standards require that only organic fertilisers are used. Most food self-provisioners (54%) used only organic fertilisers such as compost and manure, while 15% used no fertilisers at all (Jehlička and Smith 2012). Organic production does not allow for the use of a wide range of pesticides. In the case of FSP, 48% of growers said they either did not use any method of pest and mould control (22%), or only organic and manual forms (26%). Organic food certification does not include carbon dioxide emissions among its criteria (biospotřebitel.cz, n.d.) and thus so-called food miles of certified organic food might be substantial. On the other hand, the food miles generated by much of Czech FSP are likely to be low: 65% of FSP growers did not need to travel to their garden and only 15% travelled to their plot by car or on a motorbike. Similarly distinct is likely to be the minimal amount of packaging generated by FSP. It is also argued in the literature that these practices contribute to equity and social justice because, unlike the consumption of organically certified food, they provide access to healthy food across all income groups and educational levels of the population (Smith *et al.* 2015).

5. Research context and methodology

To address the first part of our two-pronged approach, namely to study ENGOs' approach to issues related to food over time, we analysed the food-related content of all issues of *Sedmá generace* from its launch in 1991 until 2010. Over more than two decades several Czech academics and environmental activists regularly contributed to the magazine. Within activist and academic circles, *Sedmá generace* is widely regarded as the most influential Czech environmental periodical (Jehlička *et al.* 2005). It could be argued, therefore, that by looking at the magazine's broadly defined coverage on AFNs such as organic food, fair-trade food, direct sales from farms and FSP, we were able to trace the contours of Czech ENGOs' discourse on sustainable food during the two decades of post-socialism. We used content analysis in studying *Sedmá generace*'s coverage of food and searched for two principal content-related categories or articles – on FSP and on market-based alternative forms of food consumption.⁴

Secondly, the core of this paper, which addresses how ENGO activists bring various forms of FSP into being through practice, is based on a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with activists. The ethnographic fieldwork consisted of several periods (lasting up to five months) of home-stay with both activists and gardening non-activists in and around the city of Brno between 2009 and 2014. Additionally, the first author spent two months as an intern with the Economy and Society Trust (Trast pro ekonomiku a společnost) in Brno. With regard to the interviews, seven were conducted with representatives from three Czech ENGOs (Hnutí Duha – the Czech branch of Friends of the Earth, two interviews; Nesehnutí, three interviews; Veronica, two interviews) and three were with journalists working for well-known and major environmentalist periodicals, namely, with one person writing for the magazine *Sedmá generace* published by Hnutí Duha and with two respondents working for the web-based magazine *Ekolist*. Hnutí Duha is the largest of the three groups and mostly focuses on national and international policy-related issues. Veronica, on the other hand, is a more locally oriented organisation, specialising in hands-on public

education and advisory service while Nesehnutí presents itself as a social and environmental movement, combining human rights issues with environmental concerns. These ENGOs are the main Czech ENGOs running food-related campaigns, which means that by interviewing almost all activists working on food- and garden-related campaigns we largely covered the field. Indeed, with a growing number of completed interviews respondents' suggestions for further interviews began to yield the names of respondents to whom we had already spoken. All materials generated during the interviews (interview recordings, leaflets received from interviewees and other notes taken during the interview) were analysed by manually separating them into various themes and tagging fragments with codes that appeared in multiple themes (Basit 2003).

6. Czech ENGOs' discourses on food in past and present

From our analysis of the coverage of market-based AFNs and FSP in *Sedmá generace*, it becomes clear that food rarely featured as a topic during the first four years of publication (1991–1994). Over the next six years (1995–2000), FSP dominated coverage of food as a topic (either in the form of romanticised descriptions of traditional – i.e. the socialist era predating – forms of household small-scale food production and consumption or hands-on guides to producing and storing food). There were three articles during those six years on community-supported agriculture. Articles on certified organic produce began to appear in 2001, and from 2004 until 2010 certified organic food and several other forms of AFNs (fair-trade food, organic food catering, direct sales from farms) dominated (30 articles) the magazine's food coverage. During the last six years of the analysis (2005–2010) the magazine published only four articles in which FSP was briefly mentioned, but there was not a single piece dedicated to FSP. This confirms the discussions by Pellandini-Simányi (2014), Klein (2009) and Oosterveer (2012) on the preference of ENGOs to campaign on market-based AFNs.

While FSP generally attracted little attention from the Czech policy-making community, a major event on sustainable consumption was organised by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in the country in May 2003, just prior to the time when AFNs started to be commonly present in *Sedmá generace*'s food coverage. In this well-publicised seminar "Sustainable Consumption Opportunities for Europe" (SCOPE), food was one of the priority areas. This seminar was attended by policy-makers and environmental activists, including representatives from Veronica. Activists from Veronica were subsequently involved in several pilot projects promoting AFNs that were initiated by an informal group formed at the seminar (Jehlička and Smith 2011). The UNEP initiative promoted a "modern" market-based model of sustainable consumption, wherein the individual consumer is supposed to act on available information and value-based preferences by which they exercise choice and take responsibility for their consumption. While policy-makers related to FSP as "backward", this UNEP-led initiative characterised consumers as being able to exert a positive impact on production and environment. Similarly, Western consultants involved in Czechia's harmonisation with the European Union (EU) contributed to the delegitimisation of the widespread FSP, which they referred to as an undesirable legacy of the socialist past and as a factor impeding the marketisation of the Czech food system and economy: "Ineffective food self-provisioning habits ... are left over from the past and this contributes to the relatively low purchasing power of the countryside" (MMR and MZe 2000, p. 18). This stance resembles both wider discourses on modern, consumption-based food practises versus backward domestic production in Central and Eastern Europe (Aistara 2015), and *Sedmá generace*'s growing preference for coverage of market-based AFNs at the expense of FSP since 2004.

However, non-published discourse expressed by activists during interviews did not fit this simple binary understanding of food practices. First of all, with respect to their views on food and sustainability, activists drew an interesting picture of what kinds of food they would like to see people buying. This picture was remarkably similar during all 10 conversations with them. First of all, they wanted to encourage people to buy "local food" (locally produced and preferably also from

a locally owned shop). The second issue mentioned was seasonality: people should buy food that is in season. Certified organic and fair-trade food only took the third and fourth positions in their ranking. This meant, for example, that while our respondents did not approve of large-scale consumption of tropical fruits such as bananas, they wanted to encourage their fellow citizens to buy certified organic or fair-trade bananas and preferably from an independent shop. Clearly, these activists saw organic/fair-trade food as a last resort and very much preferred it if people bought food through agents that operate, at least to some extent, outside the mainstream agri-food system.

The material characteristics of Czech FSP as discussed in Section 4 of this paper bear similarities with this hierarchy of local/seasonal/organic/fair trade. FSP is seasonal and local. Many FSP practitioners used little or no industrially produced pesticides and fertilisers while just over 40% effectively practised non-certified organic production (Smith and Jehlička 2013). However, when we asked activists to explain how they thought about FSP, the responses were generally dismissive of FSP during the initial stages of the interviews, as illustrated by this paper's opening quote from a Veronica activist. That quote includes both a reference to Czechia's communist past as well as the nature of the gardening as being non-organic. An editor of *Sedmá generace* approached the idea of FSP's relation to the communist regime differently to the Veronica activist. Rather than portraying FSP as originating from the communist era escapist strategy, she thought of it as a necessity during communist times to access a wide variety of fresh vegetables and as originating from a lack of alternative ways of spending leisure time. She said:

It is a legacy of the communist era when people had to be more self-sustainable.⁵ When we didn't have the chance to travel, everyone had a small cottage somewhere in the suburbs or in the countryside and would spend every weekend there and people also had gardens at the cottage, so that was what filled their free time. (Interview with an editor of *Sedmá generace*, 13 September 2011)

This association with the communist regime figured prominently, which contrasts with the view expressed by various social scientists that urban agriculture in the West underwrites neoliberalism (McClintock 2014). Among ENGO activists in Czechia, there was a deep worry that the image of the environmental movement could be harmed if ENGOs started to engage with topics that were in people's minds so closely associated with the communist era.

With respect to the claim about the nature of FSP being non-organic, the activists especially expressed concern that there was no guarantee that this food production was effectively organic or at least with reduced use of "chemicals" (industrially produced, environmentally harmful pesticides and fertilisers). Additionally, activists from both Veronica and Hnutí Duha, and to a lesser extent from Nesehnutí, stressed that there was no way in which the ENGOs could control how FSP practitioners grew their food. What also made them hesitant to endorse these practices was that they saw Czech practitioners of FSP as a group espousing little environmental awareness and therefore felt it would be very difficult to encourage people to change their garden practices to adopt a more organic approach.

From these activists' discursive reflections, a picture emerged that was profoundly different from the almost complete absence of FSP since the early 2000s from the pages of *Sedmá generace*. ENGO activists' concerns came into being – are enacted (cf. Mol 2002) – along with the gardens in which FSP was practised through the collective action of the material uncontrollability of the use of environmentally harmful substances, the [[perceived] lack of] environmental consciousness of gardeners and historical relationships between "growing your own" and Czechia's communist regime. These are important issues for activists that made them hesitant to campaign on FSP while the fact that funding was more easily available to promote AFNs (e.g. through the UNEP initiative in 2003) than for the promotion of FSP was not considered an important factor. Interestingly, ENGO activists did engage with FSP in various ways in practice, which yielded yet another set of materialities and discourses.

7. Enacting FSP through material practices among ENGO activists

From the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, four different ways in which activists engage both discursively and materially with FSP came to the fore. First of all, Nesehnutí and Veronica played an active role in opposing plans drawn up by the Brno City Hall to convert some of the current allotments used to grow fruit and vegetables as well as for relaxation into a park and a residential area. Second, Veronica ran a campaign which advised Brno citizens on environmentally friendly maintenance of their gardens, both ornamental and productive. Third, some ENGO activists practised FSP themselves. Fourth, all FSP activists preferred to consume food that was grown by households – of their relatives, neighbours or friends – rather than any form of bought food. This empirical material is different from the purely discursive material discussed above, and therefore our discussion of these practices in this section of the paper will also require a more ethnographic description.

First of all, local councils – in particular in large cities such as Brno and Prague – in the last decade actively pursued a policy of destroying large parts of affordable city allotment sites (in particular those centrally located) and using the freed space for the construction of “development projects” including upmarket flats and offices (Kolínková 2010). These developments constitute a threat to FSP in Czechia, in particular in relation to social justice because these city allotment sites offer citizens without gardens at their homes an opportunity to practise FSP. This increases the importance of understanding how Czech ENGOs relate to FSP. Nesehnutí provided assistance to allotment holders to write formal complaints to Brno City Hall regarding their plans to convert allotments into a park and residential area. This is a very clear example of how gardening can have political agency, meaning “contest[ing], transform[ing] and resignify[ing] ‘the urban’” (Certomà and Tornaghi 2015). Nesehnutí activists’ reasons to do this ranged from democratisation by giving people a political voice without the organisation itself being necessarily in favour of supporting the continued existence of these allotments, to a desire to protect the allotments because of ecological benefits such as contributing to the urban climate, something which a lawn-dominated park and residential area is incapable of. Concerns about democracy and the garden contributing to the urban climate jointly turned the ENGO activists into protectors of these allotment sites, expressing a discourse that was supportive of FSP but not because of its ability to produce sustainable food. Hence, in this case, material reality and discourse did not emerge jointly from action of the collective of gardens, urban climate, democracy, lawn-dominated parks, letters and more (Latour 2005). Rather, the complex materiality that constituted the practice of FSP, which went much beyond the production of food alone, and the wider concerns of these ENGO activists gave rise to this specific discourse that supported FSP.

The second practice was the “natural garden” project run by Veronica. This project was based on advisory sessions by a gardening expert plus a certification model imported from Austria. The certification model awarded gardeners with a plaque declaring their garden a “natural garden” if it met a set of specific criteria such as provisions for accommodating wildlife and avoiding the use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers. The gardening experts trained gardeners about practical ways of dealing with pests (e.g. using plants that attract insects that compete with the pest, and creating physical structures that improve water retention). Participating gardens could be purely ornamental, food oriented or a mixture of the two. The award of the “natural garden plaque” allowed for some direct supervision on the way in which gardening was done and food was being cultivated. The Veronica activist responsible for the coordination of this programme considered food cultivated in gardens certified as “natural gardens” to be more sustainable than any kind of bought food. Running the “natural garden” project involved the active participation of a range of entities: a gardening expert, gardens, gardeners (who joined the project voluntarily), the “natural garden plaque” and many more entities such as the plants that attract or repel certain insects or the physical structures that enable water retention. Acting together, they enacted “natural gardens”. Along with this material reality arising from the collective action of the entities involved, this also spurred a discourse on

gardening that was considered as an activity that could be influenced by the campaigners and therefore a suitable campaign topic.

Thirdly and crucially, most ENGO activists practised FSP. While those living in urban areas generally grew a few tomato plants on their balconies at most, others – living in the countryside – relied on their own produce for a sizeable share of their diets. With regard to the former, these people were generally between the age of 25 and 35, living in shared apartments without gardens. Most of these activists did not have a plot in an allotment site either. Reflecting on their lives, many of these young urban activists stressed that they would not be able to find the time to maintain a plot or garden, explaining that it would take a lot of time to eradicate weeds, water plants, sow seeds, etc. Hence maintaining a vegetable garden became inaccessible to them because the materiality of that practice required time and space, which was unavailable to them. Nevertheless, most grew some plants in the limited space at their disposal. Growing plants had been part of their upbringing, and they considered the practices of those activists who engaged with FSP extensively to be an important, explicitly pro-environmental practice.

Activists practising FSP tended to be slightly older than those mentioned above; most had homes in villages around major cities and some had children. To them, FSP was an integral part of practising a pro-environmental lifestyle consisting of a larger set of practices including insulating one's house, trying to be self-reliant in terms of water, energy and food, and making things they needed in life by themselves as much as possible (resembling some of the key tenets of "voluntary simplicity" as described by Librová 1999). For example, a couple consisting of an activist formerly employed by Hnutí Duha, now staying at home raising her children, and an employee of an organisation called Environmental Law Service (Ekologický právní servis; renamed as Frank Bold in 2013) had bought an old house in a village some 30 kilometres from Brno. They had rebuilt the house and insulated it in such a way that the house did not need any heating apart from the heat from their cook stove. The cook stove was operated using wood gathered from nearby forests or leftover wood bought from a company that produced floor boards. For milk, yoghurt and cheese, they kept some goats. They grew most of the vegetables consumed in their household. For a number of reasons, this was a challenge, including the infestation of the garden with snails which tended to eat many of the tender leaves of young plants. Yet, using industrially produced and environmentally damaging slug and snail killer was not considered an appropriate solution. First they used large glass vessels, which they placed over young plants. This turned out to be a lot of work as the vessels needed to be removed and placed back occasionally. After a while, the couple acquired a special breed of ducks that feeds on these snails but does not touch vegetables or other garden produce. A small pond had to be built in the garden for the ducks to swim in, and a duck house for the birds to be safe at night had to be created. Yet it had the added advantage of having a stable supply of eggs.

Another couple, who were in their late fifties and lived closer to Brno, also kept goats and maintained a vegetable and fruit garden. For them, too, this was a time-consuming activity and an important part of their pro-environmental lifestyles. Rather than the common practice in allotment sites of growing vegetables sown in straight lines and keeping the soil in between as weed-free as possible, they grew their crops in a much more mixed manner. Species that may be commonly considered as weeds were not always removed: if they did not do any direct harm to food-crops, they were kept in the garden. They also tried growing unusual varieties of herbs and vegetables.

The collective practice of using ducks and glass vessels to prevent pests, mixing the crops, leaving weeds in the garden and the integration of these gardening practices with other pro-environmental practices such as house insulation and efforts to use non-fossil energy sources turned these gardens and their outgrowth (food and biomass) into important aspects of pro-environmental lifestyles. The resulting gardens are materially different from the gardens in which non-activists gardened: full of unusual vegetables, free of harmful pesticides and requiring time-consuming methods. As such, the gardening-discourse that arose along with these material gardens was one in which non-gardening activists almost celebrated their fellow activist gardeners as heroes, presenting truly sustainable

gardening as very difficult to achieve and therefore not very easy to accomplish through existing forms of campaigning.

Yet these activists engaged with FSP on a regular basis by eating the produce resulting from FSP practices which they discursively enacted as “uncontrollable”, non-organic and undesirable from a campaigning perspective. All interviewed activists preferred eating this food over eating supermarket food. Part of the materiality of practising FSP is that harvests often exceeded the household’s consumptive capacity. There are various strategies to deal with this situation, including a range of food-preserving methods, but a lot of the fresh produce was generally shared with friends, grown-up children, neighbours and colleagues. Therefore, it was not uncommon for an activist to return from a weekend visit to the (rural) homes of relatives with a large amount of strawberries, bell peppers, eggs and other food – produce which may come from their relatives’ gardens or even from the gardens of those relatives’ neighbours. Activists from all three ENGOs sometimes brought such produce into the office to share. They knew the person who produced the food as well as the cultivation methods used by that person or household. As such they – and the first author, Evelien de Hoop, along with one of them – were able to witness, for example, how their parents’ neighbours used some chemicals to protect their potatoes against the well-known and widespread potato disease *phytophthora* (also known as potato blight). But the physical proximity of the place of origin of this food, namely the gardens of relatives and neighbours, meant, in fact, that this FSP was not uncontrollable: they knew more or less how the food had been produced and therefore could decide for themselves whether this food was any better to them than supermarket vegetables, fruits, eggs, milk and meat. And hence, the material characteristics of being local, seasonal, more-or-less organic and verifiable enacted the produce as food that was materially and discursively preferred over supermarket food.

8. Ideas and practices in motion

During our interviews with the activists, all these FSP-related practices were discussed at the same time.⁶ As a consequence, the distinctions between the different forms of FSP started to blur. For example, discussing the practice of consuming home-grown food challenged the discursive enactment of gardens and the food grown in them as “nothing organic” and “relics of the communist past”. One of the Veronica activists who had a particularly sceptical view of FSP initially in the interview changed his views markedly as the interview progressed. Well into the interview, he started saying:

One [positive] feature [of FSP] is local production, which substitutes imports [of food], which are wrong ... and another thing is that a lot of those allotments are centres of nature, or perhaps we can say centres of biodiversity in the city. That means that a lot of organisms can be found there, small, large, invisible and microscopic. And obviously there are a lot of birds in the allotments ... and in addition [allotments] are nice ... some of them are ugly, for sure ... but [much better] in comparison with the large boxes of warehouses and industrial hangars or some shopping malls or golf courses. (Interview with Veronica activist, 18 September 2011)

Moreover, respondents started to talk about how they imagined many people throughout the country were practising FSP because they wanted access to healthy food and they wanted to be sure about their food provenance – something which a few of them even described as resembling an actively pro-environmental subjectivity. This contrasts sharply with the concerns some activists voiced at the beginning of the interviews, namely that the average FSP practitioner would not care about the environment. In short: the distinctions between the different forms of FSP practices (and their constituent entities like gardens, gardeners, inputs and food) were not so clear-cut anymore.

The activists engaged with various kinds of “work” to deal with this. For example, some campaigners mentioned they wanted to change the “public image” of FSP into something that is – as they imagined it would be in Western Europe – an important and popular aspect of a modern pro-environmental lifestyle rather than just a relic of communism. However, they struggled to imagine

how to reconcile the short-term character of their campaigning practices with the kind of long-term commitments that gardening entails; as a campaigner from Veronica said:

I really think about it, how it's even possible to promote growing food in the garden, because there are no projects or campaigns on this in the Czech Republic. ... The production of food is kind of [a] long term [commitment]. If you really decide to have a garden and maybe not only vegetables and fruit but maybe animals as well, it's an issue of changing your lifestyle. It's not as easy as telling people you should separate waste. It is really more demanding. (Interview with Veronica activist, 14 September 2011)

In their thinking about starting FSP-supporting or FSP-promoting campaigns, a host of barriers such as the issues identified in this quote were put forward by activists. However, the availability of funding, discussed in literature on ENGOs as being a major driver of the topics on which and ways in which ENGOs run campaigns (e.g. Fagan and Jehlicka 2003, Dauvergne and Lebaron 2014), was not really important. They felt that the material characteristic of gardening – requiring a lot of time and space – and their hesitations discussed at the outset of this paper (the uncontrollable use of industrial fertilisers and pesticides and the association with the communist regime) were much more significant barriers to run an FSP-oriented campaign than a lack of funding.

9. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to carry out an early exploration of ENGOs' relationships to FSP using Czechia as a case study. We started with a historical content analysis of the magazine *Sedmá generace*. This brought to the fore a diminishing coverage and in the end absence of articles on FSP and growing coverage of market-based AFNs since the early 2000s. This was a time when FSP was dismissed by the policy-making community as a factor impeding the marketisation of the Czech food system and when Brno and Prague began to destroy some city allotment sites to make space for upmarket flats and offices (MMR and MZe 2000, Kolínková 2010). These observations strengthened the initial conundrum with which we started this paper: seen from the outside, Czech ENGOs do not seem to engage much with FSP even though FSP may have appealing environmentally friendly characteristics. More widely, this situation is mirrored in the absence of literature on ENGOs and FSP in and outside Czechia while there is an abundant literature on ENGOs and AFN-based campaigns (e.g. Nabhan 2002, Renting *et al.* 2003, Selfa and Qazi 2005, Maxey 2006, Steel 2008, Little *et al.* 2009). Activists' dismissive attitude towards FSP in Czechia during interviews aligns with the absence of articles on the topic in *Sedmá generace*, and activists explained this by bringing forward their concerns with the material uncontrollability of the use of harmful substances, gardeners' supposed lack of environmental consciousness and FSP's undesirable associations with Czechia's communist regime history.

However, our subsequent exploration of ENGO activists' reflections on FSP and their engagement with FSP in practice – including campaign practices as well as practices that may be categorised as belonging to their private lives – challenged our observations from the analysis of the coverage in *Sedmá generace*. We have shown that ENGO activists do engage with FSP, and they do so in various ways. Furthermore, our discussions of those practices using ANT's understanding of action as being distributed across a range of human and non-human entities as our starting point have brought to the fore a number of observations that help understand how ENGO activists may simultaneously be dismissive of FSP, run campaigns which support FSP indirectly, applaud FSP practitioners from within their own circles and eat FSP produce from non-environmentalist relatives and friends. These seemingly contradictory attitudes can be understood with reference to the many material and social entanglements of different kinds of FSP-related practices: each of these practices gave rise to a specific material reality with regard to gardening, and produced a specific discourse on FSP along with this material reality.

First of all, ENGO activists did campaign on FSP by assisting allotment-holders to protest against the plans of the Brno City Hall to convert allotment sites into a park and real estate, and through the roll out of the "natural garden" project. The former turned the allotments into sources of social well-

being and a factor contributing to a clement urban climate, but not into sources of sustainable food. Through the latter campaign, allotments and gardening practices became entities that could be influenced by the ENGO to become more environmentally friendly: the materiality of the garden could be altered. This happened through the participation of a gardening expert, awarding the natural garden plaque and many different entities that gardening experts and gardeners brought into the gardens (e.g. plants that repelled or attracted certain insects and physical structures to enhance water retention).

Some activists practised FSP themselves. This practice was not straightforward, for example because of the difficulties associated with replacing easy-to-use but environmentally harmful snail powder with glass vessels and ducks to eliminate snails or, most fundamentally, the limited access to land. This elaborate practice of gardening was possible through the participation of a large range of entities such as glass vessels, ducks, a duck house and access to rare seeds. All of this turned gardens into areas full of unusual vegetables and free of harmful pesticides. Yet these entities also created a situation in which activists, especially the younger ones who lived in shared apartments in the city and who were unwilling to invest time in these activities, did not practise FSP and looked up to those activists who did. At the same time, all activists consumed FSP produce they received from family and friends, which was made available for sharing because of harvest surpluses. This produce was preferable to supermarket food because of the physical proximity of this food's place of origin and because the information on the way the food had been produced was an inherent part of the food (traceability). Activists knew, or could otherwise easily find out, how their parents or neighbours practised FSP.

Lastly, by discussing all these practices related to FSP together in one interview, changes started taking place. We demonstrated that activists started to question their own notion of FSP as an undesirable campaign topic and even began thinking about ways to step up their campaign regarding FSP. While the sensitivities from ANT used in this paper – the active role of humans and non-humans, and the distributed nature of agency – was fruitful in coming to the observations made in the paragraphs above, it is difficult to study how and why activists began to change their discourses on and approaches towards FSP as discussed in the previous section. These changes occur not only because the different kinds of FSP were discussed in one interview, but these changes also relate to the issue of human intentionality, something with which ANT does not engage.

To conclude, studying the collective action of a wide range of human and non-human material entities enacting various approaches to FSP has proved fruitful in understanding how ENGO activists come to simultaneously celebrate and spurn FSP. FSP is far from a singular entity, even though the data presented in Section 4 may be used to claim that FSP in Czechia as a whole is a rather sustainable practice. Rather, it arises from specific socio-material settings, and as such is something different within each socio-material setting. Whether and how an ENGO campaigns on (or could campaign on) FSP is therefore related to the socio-political history of a place, the way the ENGO is accustomed to setting up its campaigns and especially the material characteristics of the particular type of FSP in question. ENGOs' reluctance to campaign on FSP should be seen within this set of contexts, and not simply be dismissed as irrational because FSP, on average, is sustainable according to a set of parameters measured through a survey. A truly productive exploration (with ENGOs) on whether or not it would be interesting (and if so, how) for ENGOs to start campaigning on FSP in Czechia or elsewhere, can start from this much thicker understanding of the current situation.

Notes

1. Schupp *et al.* (2015, p. 4) define home gardening as

a food provisioning strategy that involves using the physical, social and economic resources of a household to produce food, including vegetables, fruits, berries and herbs. Home gardening is unique from farming in that it generally is found in closer proximity to a residence, involves smaller plots of land and involves a broader diversity of crops. [...] The outputs of home gardening are generally consumed by the household that produces it.

We use the term FSP, while adhering to this definition, because a lot of Czech FSP takes place on land located near cottages and other types of residences used for leisure purposes.

2. That ENGOs and civil society in general have played an important role in Czechia in the establishment of farmers' markets and the promotion of organic food has been documented quite extensively (e.g. Zagata 2010, 2012, Spilková *et al.* 2013, Spilková and Perlín 2013).
3. There is also some literature on promoting FSP as a poverty-reduction strategy employed by NGOs in the global South. Such work focusses for example on how FSP contributes to the diets of "vulnerable groups of people" (e.g. Sithole 2008) or how this practice can be promoted (e.g. Purwanto 2009). However, as this paper is an exploration of the relationship between NGOs and FSP from an environmental point of view, this literature is not directly relevant to the current study.
4. Since we expected that during the 20 years under analysis FSP coverage would gradually grow, in conducting the analysis of *Sedmá generace's* content of food-related articles we followed the process of deductive content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2007).
5. This interview was conducted in English; the interviewee used the word "sustainable". However, later in the interview it became clear that she wanted to use the word "sufficient".
6. Our awareness of our own role as participants in the research – through the practices of interviewing and participant observation, for example – comes from understanding research not as an exercise in "gathering data", but as co-production, following Thrift (2003). While this point has long been accepted in anthropology (Verran 2001), this is much less the case in – for example – Latour's (2005, p. 30) work, who suggests that a researcher can remain completely neutral. Our narrative strongly contradicts this view.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the cooperation by all the respondents in this research as well as for the translation work done by Ing. Tereza Vlková Matějová. Our paper benefitted from the constructive comments by Dr. Saurabh Arora.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This paper was written as part of work on the project "Forms and Norms of Alternative Economic Practices in the Czech Republic" funded by the Czech Science Foundation [grant number GA14-33094S].

List of interviews conducted

- 18 August 2011 Sedmá generace contributing author
- 12 September 2011 Nesehnutí activist
- 12 September 2011 Nesehnutí/Veronica activist
- 12 September 2011 Veronica activist
- 13 September 2011 Sedmá generace editor
- 14 September 2011 Nesehnutí activist
- 14 September 2011 Veronica activist
- 17 September 2011 Hnutí Duha activist
- 20 September 2011 Ekolist contributing author
- 21 September 2011 Ekolist editor

ORCID

Evelien de Hoop  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5837-3756>

Petr Jehlička  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7602-7133>

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