



Trabajo Original

Epidemiología y dietética

Organic food consumption: is it possible to develop public policy? A case study of Medellín *Los consumidores de alimentos orgánicos, ¿es posible construir política pública? Estudio de casos de Medellín*

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Abstract

Introduction: in several countries, there is an increasing trend of consumers and distributors of organic food.

Objective: to identify consumer motivation, a socioeconomic profile and possible sociopolitical actions for the development of public policy by the consumers of organic products supplied by 12 alternative food distribution networks in Medellín and Eastern Antioquia.

Methods: qualitative study with semi-structured interviews and participant and non-participant observation.

Results: the main reason for organic food consumption is personal wellbeing, specifically health, followed by care for the environment and social welfare because such consumption contributes to improving the quality of life of poor producers (farmers and indigenous people). The consumption of these foods is also in some cases a form of resistance against the food industry, agroindustry and supermarkets; however, this social awareness does not imply that consumers commit themselves to sociopolitical actions transcending to the collective sphere.

Conclusion: action by local governments is required to develop strategies that consolidate the transformative potential of consumer practices regarding organic products from alternative food networks.

Key words:

Food. Organics. Food system. Food habits. Community networks.

Resumen

Introducción: el incremento de consumidores y distribuidores de alimentos y productos orgánicos constituye una tendencia en varios países.

Objetivo: establecer las motivaciones para el consumo, el perfil socioeconómico y las posibles acciones de carácter sociopolítico para la construcción de políticas públicas realizadas por los consumidores de productos orgánicos de las 12 redes de distribución alternativa de alimentos que existen en Medellín y el oriente antioqueño.

Métodos: estudio cualitativo con entrevistas semiestructuradas y observación participante y no participante.

Resultados: se halló que la principal razón de consumo es el bienestar individual, específicamente la salud, seguido del cuidado del medio ambiente y el bienestar social porque se contribuye a mejorar la calidad de vida de los productores pobres (campesinos e indígenas). Se encontró, además, que el consumo de estos alimentos, se hace en algunos casos como forma de resistencia frente a la industria de alimentos, la agroindustria y los supermercados. Sin embargo, esta conciencia social no implica que los consumidores se comprometan con acciones sociopolíticas para trascender a la esfera colectiva.

Conclusión: se requiere una acción de los gobiernos locales para desarrollar estrategias que consoliden el potencial transformador de las prácticas de los consumidores de productos orgánicos de las redes alternativas de alimentos.

Palabras clave:

Alimentos. Orgánicos. Sistema alimentario. Hábitos alimentarios. Redes comunitarias.

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INTRODUCTION

The term organic products is widely used and has several meanings. In general, it includes natural foods that are free of artificial chemicals such as fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, antibiotics and genetically modified organisms. The literature also shows that foods considered as “natural”, “local”, “fresh” and “pure” (1,2) may also be called organic.

In recent decades, there has been an increase in the number of organic product consumers around the world (3). This trend is within the context of a concern over the qualitative aspects of food, emerging from the 1960s, which includes among other factors food quality, nutritional content and methods of cultivation, processing and preparation (4-8). Research has indicated an increase in the consumption of organic foods in Europe, the United States and Australia, and, more recently, in countries such as China and India (9,10).

The most cultivated and consumed organic products are greens, vegetables and medicinal herbs because they were the first to be cultivated organically. However, supply tends to vary according to the traditions of the countries that consume organic products. The reasons that lead people to consume these products are varied. Personal wellbeing is one of the main reasons because the nutritional quality and health benefits of these products are attributes most emphasized by their consumers (11). Other studies have established the freshness and palatability of organic products, animal welfare and environmental conservation as motivation, as well as personal values, trust and identity (12-16).

Hansen et al. classified the motivations for organic consumption in three groups: environmental awareness, personal health and social awareness (15):

1. Environmental awareness is considered as one of the biggest drivers in the behavior of organic food consumers (3). People concerned about the environment are motivated by products that are considered to be respectful of the sustainability of their food habits (17).
2. Health awareness refers to the concern of consumers for their personal health status, which leads them to transform their eating habits and lifestyles (18-20). Thus, unlike environmental awareness, which focuses on concern for the environment, health awareness refers to the willingness of consumers to identify their concerns and take actions that improve their health status (20).
3. Social awareness stems from motivation out of concern for society and/or the consumer's social environment (21-23). For socially aware consumers, the organic market offers a viable and meaningful way to unite their personal concerns (for example, concern for their own health) with concerns about their social environment (for example, concerns for the welfare of their community) (15).

In relation to the socioeconomic characteristics of organic product consumers, regular consumers tend to be people with a higher education and middle to higher social class (24,25) and people who are willing to pay approximately 10% extra for these products (26,27). Similar characteristics related to the socioeco-

nomical conditions of consumers were also found in studies carried out in some Latin American countries (6,7,28,29).

Regarding purchase frequency, in a study carried out in Spain, organic product consumers were classified into three categories: regular or habitual, occasional and low consumers. Habitual consumers were defined as those who make organic food purchases at least twice a week; the other two categories include people with lower organic food purchase frequencies (27).

A particular characteristic of organic foods is that they are usually produced on a small scale by peasants and family farmers and are not distributed in large supermarket chains. They are most commonly marketed through alternative food networks (AFNs). In most cases of civil society, these initiatives seek to build new ways of producing, distributing and consuming food. AFNs are composed of alternative food producers in the broader sense of the term (organic, agrotoxin-free, and local), alternative distribution channels (other than supermarkets) and consumers (30-32). Because they distribute in local circuits, establishing trust between producers and distributors and implementing responsible consumption, AFNs are localized in nature and have been limited to relatively small groups, i.e., “niches” (33,34). For this reason, one of the issues that stimulates interest in the analysis of this field is the possibility of promoting all the components of this practice: production, distribution and consumption through public policies in order to overcome the small-scale challenges so that changes in consumption patterns are not confined to a small segment of the population.

Therefore, the importance of organic food consumption does not only rest on its health benefits. It is based on the expectation that the demand for these products will encourage the development of sustainable and fair food systems. Consumer practices can have a favorable impact on the environment, personal and public health, social cohesion and the economy (35,36). Consumer choices play a leading role in the direction of production. Consumers also exert strong influences through the ways they buy, transport, store, cook and consume their food (35,37).

According to Bui et al., the practice of eating organic foods can scale-up to become a transformative process of hegemonic systems if the motivation of those involved is not only personal in nature and does not only consider their own health and wellbeing but also if there is additional interest in social and environmental aspects that concern a larger section of the population (38). For these authors, in addition to these characteristics that have enabled AFNs to transcend the sphere of “niche” are those in which actors, i.e., consumers, seek and find mechanisms to join with other stakeholders and policy makers at the local level (38).

In Colombia, there are few studies on the consumption of organic foods, nor have the reasons for consumers and the possibilities of public policy development been explored so that organic food can be accessible to more of the population and so that the hegemony of the food system can be transformed. The objective of this study was to establish the motivation for consumption, a socioeconomic profile and possible sociopolitical actions for the development of public policy by organic product consumers from each of the 12 alternative food distribution networks that exist in

Medellín and Eastern Antioquia. The following research questions were posed: what is the socio-economic profile of organic product consumers?, what are the reasons for their preferences?, why buy from AFNs?, are these preferences motivated by social change or are they exclusively individual preferences?, and do consumers carry out collective action for the transformation of public policies aimed at the consumption of organic foods?

METHODS

This was a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews and participant and non-participant observation. The study was conducted in Medellín and the eastern subregion of the Department of Antioquia. Medellín is the second largest city in Colombia (South America) and has 2,140,00 inhabitants; it is surrounded by another nine municipalities, called the Metropolitan Area of the Aburrá Valley; the urban zone is divided into 16 municipalities, and the rural zone comprises five divisions called *corregimientos* (subdivisions of Colombian municipalities). The Eastern Antioquia region is approximately 50 kilometers from the city proper and produces most of the greens, vegetables and tubers consumed in Medellín.

AFNs comprise three components: a) agroecological or organic producers; b) distributors, which are called alternative channels because they are different from the conventional channels (supermarkets); and c) those who buy the products, i.e., the consumers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with domestic consumers (who buy for themselves or their families) and institutional consumers (food services that purchase food to process to make them available to final consumers as prepared food). Intentional sampling was carried out, as is usual in group case studies because the phenomenon is intended to be present in the subjects selected (39). The interviewees were referred by alternative distribution channels (ADCs), which are the places where the food produced in AFNs is sold. In Medellín, there are 12 AFNs that were asked for information about their domestic and institutional consumers. No exclusion criteria were applied. Names and contact data of domestic or institutional consumers were requested from the 12 AFNs in the city, and the persons referred to were interviewed.

The initial contact with the participants was by telephone and via e-mail to explain the objectives of the research project and to request an interview. Fifteen semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, ten to domestic consumers and five to administrators or owners of spaces for institutional consumption. Visits were also made to the ADCs for participant observation that consisted of buying food, inquiring about types of products and exchanging information informally with sellers and other consumers. Non-participant observations were also carried out to purchase products but without any exchange or other type of communication. The collection of information was carried out by two teachers and six students in their last semester of Nutrition and Dietetics who were previously trained on conducting interviews, to ensure consistency. Fifteen interviews were conducted because category saturation was achieved using this number. The

interviews were transcribed and coded immediately after their completion. The data collection instruments and informed consent were approved by the Committee for Bioethics of the University Research Department through Act 15-43-674. The information was collected between the months of January to July 2016.

INFORMATION ANALYSIS

With regard to categories of analysis, two levels of analysis were carried out. In the first level, based on the reviewed literature and taking into account the objectives of the research, initial categories were defined. Once the codes were analyzed and applied, new codes and emerging categories were added to the initial proposal. A synthesis of the categories used is presented in table I. With this first level of analysis, a characterization of each of the cases was obtained separately.

In the second level of analysis, an exhaustive review was made of each of the categories to contrast the different cases. In this way, similarities and differences were identified to establish the final findings and, in particular, to address the objective of outlining possible sociopolitical actions carried out by the interviewees. All the coding and analysis of the information was done using the specialized software ATLAS/ti version 7.5.11 (40).

RESULTS

The results are presented simultaneously for domestic consumers (DCs) and institutional consumers (ICs), to later describe trends that are outlined in both cases.

SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

The DCs interviewed are people between 40 and 62 years old, with high levels of education (most have finished higher education that includes a postgraduate degree) and with an average monthly income equivalent to seven minimum wages (2,400 USD); they belong to the middle class. In the participant observation, other consumers were also identified as young families, pregnant or with children, who seek appropriate food for these periods of life.

The ICs are restaurants, which function as small businesses (only one was industrial), and half are family-owned. All the ICs are located in upper-middle class neighborhoods. Most involved the organic food market in the last seven years. The owners of the restaurants state that their clients are people of a medium-high socioeconomic level, young, and employed in the public or private sector; they are defined as people who show an affinity for reading, the arts and craftsmanship. Some restaurants have mostly foreign clients (tourists or business travelers). Only one of them has some (very few) clients with low economic resources or low education levels who devote themselves to trades such as recycling or field labor.

In relation to the prices of the products, the majority of domestic consumers find prices that are consistent with their expectations.

Table I. Categories of analysis and some guiding questions

Analysis category	Subcategories	Guiding questions
Social agency work	Organizational origin Grounds for contention Objects of transformation	Are you part of any network or organization? Why did you decide to participate in it? Are you part of local and regional organizational movements? Have you participated in social and/or political demonstrations? With what objectives?
Social and demographic conditions	Education level Occupation Income Place you live	Level of education achieved, current occupation, family income, place where you usually reside and residence time
Distribution model		Why do you choose this food marketing channel? Do you use other channels and for what reason?
Food practices	Food consumption	Do you have a special preference for the consumption of certain types of food? For what reason? Are these recent practices in your life?
Connectivity	Relationship between producers and consumers	What do you know about the producer of the food you buy? What relationship do you have with the producer?

They are usually willing to pay more for the food because they consider them healthy products. The ICs think differently. They find that the prices of some organic products are high, reaching 200% of traditional market prices (market places), which makes their final products more expensive. They point out that the cause of the high prices is the lack of suppliers and few logistical resources, especially transportation, available to organic producers.

PURCHASE PATTERN AND FREQUENCY

The organic products that DCs and ICs buy are fruits, vegetables, spices, beans, rice, bakery products (artisanal and whole-wheat), eggs, oils, quinoa, chia, amaranth, nut or soy drinks, dairy, panela, chocolate and wines. The most important imported products are legumes, which are the most demanded raw material in some of the vegetarian restaurants and come through regional importers from Canada. Both types of consumers (ICs and DCs) buy 70-90% of fruits, vegetables and greens in the ADCs, but all combine them with purchases in conventional and/or traditional channels (supermarket and in the traditional channel, market-place) because ADCs still do not have a wide range of products.

Most of the interviewees state their food habits are in a process of change. Not all consumers define themselves as vegetarians, but they agree that they are making changes in their dietary habits that include less red meat, refined sugars, salt, flours and oils.

MOTIVATIONS FOR THE CONSUMPTION OF ORGANIC FOODS

The arguments for the consumption of organic food can be divided into three groups: the first for health and personal well-

being, the second for social welfare and the third as a form of resistance to the hegemonic food system. The groups are not exclusive; consumers are based on the three motivations simultaneously, as explained below.

Personal wellbeing as a motivation for the consumption of organic foods

Regarding the first group of arguments, health care is the main motivation of all the interviewees for their preferences; specifically, they want to consume food free of pesticides. The above reasons have the added benefit of quality and palatability. Many of the interviewees find that organic fruits and vegetables have a better consistency and are fresher. They also emphasize their ability to last in any form of storage: *"I like these foods because they are organic; they [producers] do not use chemicals, so I feel better knowing that I am not consuming chemicals"* (DC).

Environmental welfare as a motivation for the consumption of organic foods

Environmental welfare as a reason for consumption has several facets: sustainable production, water conservation and respect for animals. A restaurant owner states: *"This business was born to provide, in addition to a healthy gastronomic supply, an environmental awareness; the owners (...) saw that in Medellín, there was a need to venture into a philosophy that starts from awareness for the environment, the concern over animal abuse and responsible consumption of food"* (IC).

Social welfare as a motivation for the consumption of organic foods

For the interviewees, a fair market is the main reason for buying. Fair is understood as purchasing from vulnerable social groups such as farmers and indigenous groups, to contribute to improving their quality of life: *"I love these products because they are produced by hand, made by farmers"* (DC); *"we try to contribute to the mission that the earnings should go directly to the person who deserves it, that is to say, the farmers that produce the foods because, due to their lack of knowledge about marketing or distribution, they tend to be taken advantage of because the person with such knowledge steals part of their usefulness"* (IC).

Food as a form of resistance that motivates the consumption of organic foods

Different types of resistance were found in different aspects:

- Some people consume organic products because they have assumed new lifestyles they describe as "more spiritual", "slower-paced" and "less materialistic". In these cases, the consumption of organic foods is complemented by practices such as meditation, yoga and alternative medicine. These consumers have an understanding of health and disease that differs from Western medicine. Often, they also grow food in their homes and exchange it among groups of friends: *"From our philosophy, we believe that the body as a vehicle feeds on many things, not only physical foods as such, but on what you think, what you perceive, how you see the environment, so we wanted to develop a project with which we could impact society, through one of the feeding areas"* (IC).
- Some interviewees consume organic products because they see it as a form of reviving ancestral customs and from a familiar rural past that shelters many Colombian families: *"It's because we came from a farm; we never saw my dad who was a farmer throw chemicals on the crops; my grandmother also had a little garden, and from there I got all my food"* (DC).
- One of the most reiterated elements in both the IC and DC interviewees is the distrust of the food industry. On the one hand, the contents of the products manufactured by this industry require additives, preservatives, long-distance transportation and durable packaging. Second, consumers question the way in which companies say they are committed to the environment and the healthy lines sold: *"[companies] have some 'healthy' lines but use them as a marketing strategy"* (IC). Some products of the food industry have become more controversial, as in the case of soft drinks, not only because of their impact on health but also because they have become a symbol of the food system controlled by multinationals.
- In addition to the criticisms of the food industry are also criticisms of the certification of food quality that, according to some interviewees, has been *"monopolized by the industry*

to allow it to establish its own standards and exclude the things that are made under other conditions" (IC).

In this sense, consumers interviewed believe that the proximity and knowledge of the producer generates a level of confidence, which can be a greater guarantee than the processes of industrial certification: *"Certification is very expensive for poor farmers and producers, and having a certificate does not guarantee that things are truly being done well. When the consumer knows the producers, when they converse between producers and consumers, one trusts more in that than in the stamps"* (DC).

- Some consumers interviewed state that they want to commit to local social and economic development. They perceive that the conventional food system represents a threat to this development. Organic foods are conceived as *"belonging to us"*, *"produced in the way we have always done it"*, *"what protects our culture, what allows money to remain here"*, and *"what takes care of our environment"* (IC). They also prefer purchasing from organic producers because they are local, bringing more resources for their own towns: *"We can buy soft drinks, or we have the possibility of revitalizing the local economy that is boosted with all local products such as our fruits"* (DC).

The development of autonomy for the consumer

Some interviewees stated that they prefer to consume organic products because they are local to the region and because they are not commercialized in the conventional system, in order to achieve greater autonomy from supermarkets and multinational corporations. One of their aims is the recovery of local products that are currently not consumed because supermarkets do not sell them or products from neighboring countries: *"Now we have new opportunities; here they have brought quinoa, chia, amaranth, maca, kaniwa, other Peruvian foods... Yes, today they are revealing some very rich possibilities. They are being revitalized by groups of young people, who work together with the farmers and are generating other perspectives of food and other aspects of life"* (DC).

Social and political action

Both the ICs and the DCs interviewed do not belong to associations or social movements nor are they linked to organizations that develop public action in a structured way. It is about habits or lifestyles for the private sphere, organized primarily around a social circle of friends and family who believe and enjoy these practices. There is no intention to carry out collective social actions; on the contrary, in some cases, they perceive that associating with and joining regional or national networks would mean losing autonomy and local wealth. They consider that these experiences of consumption and marketing of organic foods must each preserve

their own dynamics of growth and development because it is about encouraging local development.

DISCUSSION

In this study on organic product consumers of the 12 AFNs in Medellín, it was found that the main reason for consumption is personal wellbeing and, specifically, health, followed by care for the environment and social welfare because it contributes to improving the quality of life of poor producers (farmers and indigenous) while promoting local development. It was also found that the consumption of these foods in these networks is, in some cases, a form of resistance against the food industry, agroindustry and supermarkets.

However, the interviewees do not intend to convert these practices into a form of social and political action that organizes new food and nutritional systems. It is a transformation of several spheres of one's private life, without the intention of projecting to the collective sphere.

This characteristic, which is not committed to collective action, is similar to that found in other Latin American countries where organic product consumers show indifference toward fair trade practices and solidarity economies and toward the commitment of establishing lasting bonds of trust. They even show distrust of social movements such as fair trade (41). In contrast, a study conducted in the United Kingdom found that many consumers promote organic food distribution channels as alternatives to supermarkets (42).

The combination of ethical-social reasons and reasons related to individual benefits for the consumption of organic foods is a characteristic found in several studies carried out in different countries (26,43,44). Some authors suggest that the simultaneity of motivations manifests ambiguity in the values of consumers because, on the one hand, they aim to contribute to sustainability and protection of the environment but, on the other hand, consumerist and egocentric motivations remain that challenge the potential social benefits. That is, consumption is also for their own benefit, or pleasure, rather than motivated by reasons of goodwill or concern for the environment (43,45).

From our point of view, as some authors have stated, the concepts related to the consumption of these products, such as "green consumption", "critical consumption" and "ethical consumption" have evolved gradually and, in a general way, stimulate consumers to consider their daily consumption practices from a moral perspective. This incorporation of moral philosophy acknowledges that in consumption, personal choices encompass complex and conflicting aspects in terms of values, motivation and decision-making of individuals (45,46). That is, it would be necessary to consider conflicting values inspired in these consumers so as not to dismiss their transforming potential.

From this perspective, not only to dismiss the transformative potential of consumption but also, in particular, to explore the possibility of developing alternative food systems that transform production, distribution and consumption, we think that local gov-

ernments can play an important role in incorporating alternatives into development plans similar to those analyzed in this study. Public policies of a local nature, such as institutional purchases in which food is purchased for programs such as school restaurants or early childhood programs, as well as for public institutions, such as prisons, hospitals, community kitchens and so on, can be the mechanism to scale these processes and take advantage of the initiative of civil society and consumers in particular.

Finally, we raised the need for future research of a qualitative nature on the perceptions of these foods among the low-income population with lower levels of education and of a quantitative nature in order to establish trends in the number and profile of consumers.

CONCLUSION

The role of the government and, particularly, of local governments through public programs is a strategy to take advantage of the transformative potential of alternative food trends in the production, distribution and consumption of food.

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