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## Preparatory action on EU plant and animal genetic resources

# An overview and comparison of the Slow Food agendas in the Netherlands and Italy

## Overview

### 1. Objectives

The website of the Slow Food association in the Netherlands (Slow Food Nederland; SFN) mentions to contribute to:

- appreciation of food and a relaxed approach to better value our meals;
- promotion of quality food, rich in natural taste and aromas;
- promotion of responsible and sustainable production that respects humans, animals and the environment;
- protection of authentic production processes, exceptional products and our gastronomic heritage;
- development of local economies and food communities.

The Slow Food Italia website features the following objectives: ...” to give the right value to food, in respect of those who produce, in harmony with the environment and ecosystems, thanks to the knowledge of territories and traditions of which they are custodians.”

The website of Slow Food International mentions as a mission: “Slow Food envisions a world in which all people can access and enjoy food that is good for them, good for those who grow it and good for the planet (good: quality, flavoursome and healthy food; clean: production that does not harm the environment; fair: accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions and pay for producers).”

According to Cinzia Scaffidi, vice president of Slow Food Italia (SFI), as the first national organisation, founded in the 1980s, it started off as a gastronomic association, with a focus on traditional and regional products rather than global and international dishes. It built on new ideas such as fair trade and the need to protect the environment that emerged from the 1970s but also adapted those concepts. Whereas fair trade was not interested in product quality, Slow Food made that change. It brought together the hitherto disconnected worlds of environment, poverty alleviation and food diversity.

In the interview with the chair of Slow Food Nederland, Jack Stroeken stressed the focus on tasty, pure and fair food. He also stressed that the success of Slow Food is based on the unique combination of biodiversity and food through the diversity in the food chain. No other organisation focusses on this combination.

Key concepts in all mission versions are food quality, care for the environment and fairness for the producer. In addition, the Italian site uniquely makes reference to custodians of territories and local traditions. The relationships with the agenda of the genetic resources community are obvious, as is apparent in the focus on sustainable production, special food products, and local knowledge.

## 2. Description of Slow Food

Slow Food was started in the 1980s by the Italian Carlo Petrini and a group of food activists with the initial aim to defend regional traditions, good food, gastronomic pleasure and a slow pace of life. The choice of its name was a critique on the rising share of fast food in people's diets. In almost three decades of history, the movement has evolved to embrace a comprehensive approach to food that recognises the strong connections between plate, planet, people, politics and culture. Today Slow Food represents a global movement involving thousands of projects and millions of people in over 160 countries.

This case study presents the common and distinctly national features of Slow Food activities in Italy (1986) and the Netherlands (2008).

### Activities

- Ark of Taste products. Small-scale produced quality products that belong to the cultures, history and traditions of the entire planet and represent an extraordinary heritage of fruits, vegetables, animal breeds, cheeses, breads, sweets and cured meats. Many products are supported by a Presidium in which producers collaborate to maintain production methods in their regional context. Slow Food Italy maintains 640 Ark of Taste products, whereas Slow Food the Netherlands now features 35 Ark of Taste products.
- Slow Food Chefs Alliances. A collaboration of chefs who promote the ideas of Slow Food, creating dishes based on local and sustainable products. Guests are not only served the dishes but also informed about the origin and production process leading to the products in the dish. Slow Food the Netherlands features 60 chefs, whereas Slow Food Italia has enlisted a few hundred chefs. The project started in 2009 and is so far only active in a limited number of countries.
- Production and distribution of books and magazines. The Netherlands publishes the quarterly Slow Food Magazine at 3,200 copies per edition, and since 1990 Slow Food Italia has published a large number of books through Slow Food Editore (more than 13 titles), as well as a magazine for its members.
- Slow Food Nederland has also established thematic activities in dedicated working groups, including on such themes as food collected from the wild and production of unpasteurised cheese.

In the Netherlands, the major activities of SFN are the Ark of Taste and the Chefs Alliance, as well as the independently managed activities of the Youth Food Movement, internationally headquartered in Amsterdam.

One of the members of the Chefs Alliance in the Netherlands is Nel Schellekens, who owns a restaurant in Winterswijk, on the Dutch-German border. She is well known as a Slow Food promoter. The hallmark of the restaurant is opinionated cuisine. Almost all products are regional and produced under organic conditions, and are purchased directly from the producer, they are therefore season-dependent. The menu is based on what is supplied in the region. Fresh products provide optimal taste. In her opinion, what co-exists well in the field co-exists well on the plate. All parts of the produce are used, from head to tail. The available farm produce is the starting point for the menu. Short supply chains form its principle. One of the slogans used is “Eating against forgetting”. The restaurant promotes the Slow Food agenda, but does not necessarily fit all the rules, or actively advertises for Slow Food. The Chef finds working under SKAL (Dutch monitoring agency) certified organic conditions too demanding, and of no added value, since the clientele is not interested in certification. By its way of working the restaurant can only function in a rural area.

Food stays also at the centre of SFI’s activities, but it connects it with the wider agenda of economy, health, respect for the producer and international relationships. It has recognised seeds as the pillar of agriculture, and it is concerned about the concentration in the breeding industry. SFI promotes organic agriculture, and it promotes food markets where consumers can buy their food directly from the producers.

## Analysis

### 3. Organisation and funding

In a number of countries, including Italy and the Netherlands, national organisations have been established. All national associations have decisional autonomy but follow the policy guidance provided by Slow Food International. They coordinate all Slow Food activities in the country, and depend on their own financial resources. They support convivia (local member groups), organise events and select and maintain Ark of Taste products. There are over 1,500 convivia worldwide. Slow Food Italia boasts 300 convivia and the Netherlands 20. The organisation has also founded Terra Madre, an international association of food producers, and the Youth Food Movement, a collaboration of producers and consumers for a more fair and healthy food system.

Slow Food Nederland (SFN) relies mostly on volunteers, and therefore its budget is modest. A small office and half-time office assistant are available, contributing to the sustainability of the national organisation. The Youth Food Movement (YFM) branch, being part of SFN, and the local 20 convivia (local sponsors, entrance fees) are financially independent. Most of the income comes from membership fees (now 3,000 members), amounting to 200,000 EUR annually. Small sponsor packages each of 200 – 700 EUR add 10,000 EUR to the budget. A challenge is to maintain all members and to minimise discontinuation of membership. No government funding has been obtained so far. There is the intention of establishing a new foundation, in addition to the association in order to raise more money from additional

sponsors and to carry out more projects. In Germany, this approach has been very effectively used in fundraising.

SFI currently has 35,000 members. The annual fee is only 25 EUR, meaning that the membership-based income is only 900,000 EUR per year. A substantial part of SFI's income is derived from the return on two major activities, i.e. the publishing house that publishes books, and Slow Food Promozione that organises events. The organisation employs 30 staff members.

To a large extent, the organisation depends on the voluntary activities of its members, as well as the financial support of partners and supporters. It is apparent that until now SFN has not received any funding from the public sector, unlike Slow Food International and SFI. Through the Chefs Alliance, the Youth Food Movement and Terra Madre, Slow Food is well connected to professionals, whether they are farmers or restaurant runners, who earn their living with producing or presenting food diversity.

#### **4. Partners and networking**

Both Slow Food Italia and Slow Food Nederland have many partners and supporters. Partners include the chefs and restaurants participating in the Slow Food Chef Alliances. Many organisations in the public and private sectors support the two associations, in the Netherlands they are over 40, ranging from bookshops and restaurants to seed producers. SFN maintains partnerships with BioNext (association promoting organic agriculture) and departments in the University of Amsterdam and Radboud University. YFM maintains a partnership with OxfamNovib (funder) and other Dutch NGOs, e.g. Fair Food. Amongst others, Wageningen University would form an interesting partner. A scientific advisory committee could add to SFN' work. The challenge appears in being able to use all opportunities due to a lack of professional capacity at national level.

The Chef of De Gulle Waard collaborates directly with producers, farmers as well as farms working with the mentally handicapped, and knows them well. In many cases she orders produce (both vegetables and meat) directly from the farm, and encourages farmers to diversify, she has also adopted her own farm animals. She promotes the growth of specific varieties and breeds rather than just crops and animals. She teaches students in public hotel trade schools. She also collaborates with various associations managing traditional crops and animals, but is not limited by tradition. She has promoted the maintenance of several rare breeds (goose, goat, cattle, pig) by providing an outlet through dishes offered in her restaurant against a higher price than for mainstream produce ("fair trade in the Achterhoek").

Through its own university, SFI collaborates with many university groups in Italy, and makes an attempt to create linkages between the traditionally narrow agendas of Italy's individual university departments. Together with Action Aid and Active Citizenship, SFI has established Italia Wake Up, to link food quality with poverty issues, in order to enhance the impact of its message. For example, Italia Wake Up has supported good quality food services in schools.

The support that Slow Food International receives from the European Commission is acknowledged on the organisation's website.

### **5. Positioning, perception and impact**

Many scholars (cf. references) have argued that the Slow Food movement is not only concerned with distinctive regional tastes and food politics but also with the much wider debates about the future of cultural identity and moral economies. Some have argued that the Slow Food producers are important guardians of global agrobiodiversity, which conventional production erodes.

Although amongst politicians and policy makers as well as major retail companies in the Netherlands, SFN is quite well known for its powerful narrative, the brand awareness of SFN amongst the general public is still regarded to be too low. Influence is indirect. It is well possible to increase the interest of the general public in regional and traditional products and production methods, as well as farmers' markets. For example, SFN provides a weekly column in one of the national newspapers, which addresses the SFN agenda. Also, the yearly Week of the Taste adds much to the publicity for the SFN agenda.

Similarly, as a civil society organisation, SFI is involved in politics. It relates to the institutions and its advocacy work is directed at policy makers and opinion leaders in order to be effective in sending its message and realising its goals. SFI is an actor in the public debate. It promotes the notion that consumers as citizens should be conscious of the quality of the food they buy and eat. By doing so, it enlarges its impact. Therefore, its impact is not only realised by the size of its membership.

Nel Schellekens, by working with producers and serving many regional dishes ("the landscape on your plate"), notes that the restaurant attracts a diverse clientele, and counts many guests from its own (relatively less wealthy) region. In doing so, the restaurant contributes to more awareness on food and its production, and against the trend towards consuming global and industrial food.

Slow Food has been very influential in politics and policy development. The challenge is to directly reach more people in the general public with Slow Food's message. In other words, the challenge is to make the linkage between biodiversity and food clear to the public through an attractive message. Slow food, fair trade and sustainability do not automatically coincide in the minds of the general public. The restaurant De Gulle Waard points towards one way of reaching a wider support for the Slow Food ideals.

Interestingly, in the view of the SFN chair, there is no apparent difference in the level of interest in food culture in the Netherlands and in Italy, although food may be much more central and self-evident in the Italian culture and tradition. What does appear specific to the Netherlands is the role of vegetables in the diet.

While this study set out to analyse the differences in success between SFN and SFI, this difference was contested by the chair of SFN. Although less obvious, the Dutch consumer is as interested in traditional foods and traditional food processing.

**Featuring on the website of Slow Food International  
(<http://www.fondazione Slow Food International.com/en/>)**

“Without biodiversity, we can’t talk about sustainable agriculture, food sovereignty, or access to good, clean and fair food for everyone.”

“Protecting biodiversity means respecting diversity in cultures, knowledge and local areas.”

## **6. Communication**

In the words of its chair, SFN is an “event organisation”. Through the Week of Taste and other national, regional and local events SFN aims to reach a wider public. The Youth Food Movement supports the organisation of the yearly Food Film Festival. The Chefs have committed themselves to featuring at least Slow Food Ark of Taste products in their menus and to provide background to the respective dishes. The website and Facebook form the major communication instruments for SFN. The SFN members are informed through a quarterly Magazine as well as newsletters. The major message that SFN should send, is that our agro-food system is “sick”, should make better use of diversity and needs to respect and adjust to the ecosystem. In effect, SFI operates very similarly and sends the same messages.

The menu of De Gulle Waard features mainly regional and seasonal dishes, but does not promote itself as a Slow Food restaurant. However, guests are informed about the regional, organic and seasonal character of all dishes. More than half of the Slow Food members in the region consist of producers. One of the Slow Food challenges the Chef perceives is that the Ark of Taste should not only adopt products or dishes but actively support the farm produce that is the input for the dish or final product.

## **7. Outputs and added value**

SFN is uniquely positioned to address what others disregard, i.e. the linkages between food, diversity and ecosystem. SFN has increased recognition for the role of diversity in agriculture, rather than in nature. The Ark of Taste and the Chefs Alliance form major outputs. This is the success of SFN, which is also an important factor and innovator in Slow Food at international level.

Barriers are formed by the upcoming transatlantic free trade agreement TTIP and the increased use of patents in plant breeding that both limit access to and free use of diversity. For SFI, the major output is awareness raising on the importance of food to our lives, our health, our planet. The messages conveyed include the challenges experienced include for example how to break the negative trends of raising diabetes and obesity in kids.

SFN’s outputs are various, and include in particular - but not only - the Ark of Taste and the Chefs Alliance. Its added value is not only in raising public awareness on the origin of our food, but also in influencing the political debate on the linkages between, biodiversity, food and ecosystem. The restaurants of the Chefs Alliance form an excellent instrument for Slow Food to reach the consumer, and this makes the Chefs Alliance an essential instrument in Slow Food’s strategy.

## 8. Sustainability; Upscaling and out-scaling

Sustainability of SFN as such is not questioned. However, to improve sustainability it is envisaged to increase the members from 3,000 to 5,000 in the coming five years, and to attract more sponsors and funds to the Slow Food Foundation. This should also add to the upscaling and out-scaling agenda that is founded in the networks with other organisations such as BioNext and OxfamNovib, as well as the Food Film Festival.

Whereas SFI itself is traditionally focused on the consumer, Terra Madre focuses more on the producer and the production system. The two approaches therefore complement each other. This complementarity makes the two organisations more sustainable and resilient.

The formula of the restaurant De Gulle Waard, partnering in the Chefs Alliance, has shown to attract a wide diversity of guests and provides a substantial number of producers with (added) income.

## Conclusions

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Message linking diversity with food and the producer; Policy influence, invited to provide views; Links with cultural identity.	Reaching a truly wide audience; Unrecognised influence.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Forging wider coalitions; Mainstreaming messages; Bringing producers in the equation.	Undervalued contribution to policy development; Limitation in growth due to lack of interest from wide public.

The work of Slow Food in general, and SFN and SFI in particular focuses directly on the elements to promote products stemming from local and traditional breeds and crops that have been neglected and for which survival is threatened without “affirmative action”. It promotes traditional practices and products. To reach these goals Slow Food tries to reach both consumers and producers, and to bring them together. A powerful element of the Slow Food approach is the linking of the work to the market through the presidia of producers of an Ark of Taste product and the restaurants associated with the Chefs Alliance. More intensified coalitions with organisations and initiatives in the genetic resources community might add to the impact of its work. Both sides deal with the food on our plate but come from opposite ends.

In the Netherlands, such collaboration would involve Eeuwig Moes/De Oerakker as well as the Foundation for Rare Farm Animals SZH, where initiatives promoting the conservation and use of threatened genetic resources for food and agriculture come together. In addition, its collaboration with OxfamNovib in focusing on the small-scale producer could be strengthened.

The strengths of Slow Food, and in particular its national organisations Slow Food Nederland and Slow Food Italia are (1) in the message linking diversity and food and

appealing on the public's interest in traditional food products, and (2) in influencing policy makers. Its current weakness is in reaching a major segment of the general public, and to make the concept of slow food as recognisable as fast food. Since its message links diversity with food and ecosystem, and appeals to respect tradition and the producer, its opportunities may be to forge stronger linkages with the organisations active in this wide area of work. Nevertheless, its threats may be that much of its influence on EU policy remains “under water”, and is not recognised as the results of Slow Food membership. The movement is challenged to avoid the position of the invisible “Free Masonry” since its message should reach all consumers.



Figure 1: Regional products on display for sale in Restaurant De Gulle Waard



Figure 2: Chef in the Chef Alliance Nel Schellekens



## Annex 1 – List of interviewees

- Jack Stroeken, chair Slow Food Nederland
- Cinzia Scaffidi, vice president of Slow Food Italia
- Nel Schellekens, chef restaurant De Gulle Waard, Winterswijk, the Netherlands

## Annex 2 – List of references

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Website Slow Food Nederland, visited between 1 August and 30 September 2015:  
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<http://www.slowfood.it/>

Website Slow Food International, visited between 1 August and 30 September 2015:  
<http://www.slowfood.com/>