

Beyond Efficiency - Reflections from the Field on the Future of the Local Food Movement

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Introduction

In 2000, in the mountainous, western-most region of North Carolina, a new initiative, the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP), launched a local food campaign - an awareness raising campaign designed to educate the public about the benefits of buying food grown by local farms and build markets for locally grown food. ASAP's Local Food Campaign was one of a handful around the country responding to the loss of farms and farmland and to the decline of rural communities in the context of globalizing markets and food industry consolidation. These early campaigns, each located in regions with strong agricultural traditions and relatively small farms, aimed to build markets for locally grown food and, through consumers acts of buying local, stem the tide of farm loss. Almost fifteen years later, these first campaigns, with innumerable other campaigns and initiatives from around the country, are the basis of an emergent movement focused on local food and local food system development. What began as a marketing strategy to help farms left out of the dominant food marketplace survive has grown to be about much more. Today, local food is conceived as a means of creating environmental, social, and economic sustainability and a path to transforming the food system. From humble roots with modest goals, local food has evolved into a full-fledged social phenomenon, resonating across a broad demographic.

Local food as a concept and movement is now at a critical juncture - one that will determine if it becomes a movement to liberate and decentralize food production and transform our food system or one that is co-opted and adapted to fit within the existing food system. As efforts to develop local and regionally based food systems continue to gain momentum, an approach that focuses on technology and infrastructure has come to the forefront of action. To create space for locally grown food in mainstream markets, efforts are focusing on increasing the "efficiencies" of locally grown food in order to compete within the existing and dominant paradigm of food production and distribution; the current preoccupation with food hubs is an example of this approach.

In this article, in the spirit dialogue and critical reflection and in the interest of strengthening what we believe to be a potentially transformative social movement, we - two long term movement practitioners - look at the current preoccupation with efficiency efforts and argue that the focus on efficiency to scale the movement may actually be counterproductive to larger and longer term movement goals. While there is a need to create and/or adapt infrastructure, technology, and logistics to facilitate the growth and expansion of local food systems, the efficiency approach food hubs represent offers little space to challenge the existing food industry - their genesis lies in the established rules and structures of the food system and are designed to fit local food within established industry norms. In relation to this current direction in the movement, we articulate local food as a food democratizing strategy - a means of raising awareness, a means of connecting consumers with food production and its many social, economic, and environmental intersections, a means of building people's capacity to act - as consumers and civic actors - in ways that support the development of just food systems.

The paper begins with a discussion of the discourse surrounding local food - the claimed benefits and qualities and scholarly appraisals of these claims. We then move into a description and discussion of current efforts to use food hubs as an example of an efficiency strategy to mainstream locally grown food and assess the capacity of this strategy to challenge current industry practices. The final segment looks at why local food in particular can be a catalyst of food system change and explores what is unique about local food in relation to conditions in the current global context.

The Local Food Trap

Across movement discourse and within the academic literature, local food is associated with a constellation of qualities and benefits - its fresher and more flavorful than food produced for the industrialized, global food industry. Local food is more environmentally sustainable; closer production-consumption relationships mean fewer food miles, less reliance on fossil fuels, and smaller scale farms purportedly use more ecologically sound production practices (Goodman and Goodman 2007; Lockie and Halpin 2005; Norberg-Hodge, et al. 2002; Pirog 2004). Buying locally grown food strengthens local economies - it increases farmer profits and supports family farms, keeps money circulating locally, and strengthens agricultural and nonagricultural sectors (Allen and Hinrichs 2007; Halweil 2002; LaTrobe 2001; Meter 2011; O'Hara 2011; Swenson 2008; Swenson 2011; Tregear 2011). Food produced locally is more nutritious because it is fresher, i.e., less travel time means more nutrient retention, and local food improves nutrition because it increases the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables and reduces the incidence of obesity and other health related problems (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen and Guthman 2006; Bagdonis, et al. 2008; Cleveland, et al. 2011; Ferrer, et al. 2011; Freedman 2009; Salois 2011).

For local food proponents, the transformative potential of local food and local food system development lies in its connectedness to specific ecologies and communities (Allen, et al. 2003; Allen and Hinrichs 2007; Johnston, et al. 2009; Kloppenburg, et al. 1996; Perrett 2013). The close linkages between production and consumption afforded by local food challenge the anonymity of global market supply chains and the hegemony of the self-interested individual. Embedded in the conditions of particular places, local food systems can be responsive to the particularities of ecology, economy, and community (Perrett 2013:82-83). Closer production-consumption relationships create market transparency, build community relationships, and engage consumers in the issues that intersect food production like land, labor, energy, health, and food insecurity. The direct experience puts food production back into the social consciousness of consumers and stimulates civic engagement (Allen and Hinrichs 2007; Johnston, et al. 2009; Kloppenburg, et al. 1996).

Despite the rhetoric, however, scholars argue that there little evidence to substantiate any of these claims (Allen and Hinrichs 2007; DeLind 2011). For Born and Purcell (2006), these assumed qualities and outcomes fall into the "local trap," the presumption by scholars and activists that local is inherently more

desirable and just. The trap is that there is nothing inherent to scale - local, regional, national, or global. The qualities of scale are produced by social actors with different motivations and agendas. Following, for local food systems to produce social justice, ecological sustainability, food security, and so on, specific actions have to be taken to create them. Food system practitioners and planners that fall into the local trap confuse scale with outcomes so that local becomes the goal rather than the means to achieve other outcomes (Born and Purcell 2006:196).

Others question the capacity of a movement focused on directing consumption practices to create meaningful change in the food system (Alkon and Mares 2012; Allen 2004; Allen, et al. 2003; Allen and Guthman 2006; Allen and Hinrichs 2007; DeLind 2002; DeLind 2003; DeLind 2011; Goodman and Goodman 2007; Guthman 2008; Maniates 2001). This strategy, which uses the market to change the market, reinforces the neoliberal consumer mindset (Guthman 2008). It conflates consumerism with civic engagement and offers little room for addressing social inequity or injustice (Allen and Guthman 2006:411-412; Allen and Hinrichs 2007; DeLind 2002; Hinrichs and Allen 2008). Argued by DeLind (2002:276, emphasis in original), the consumer focus emphasizes “a sense of *me* rather than a sense of *we*.”

Some scholars, echoing the sentiments of Born and Purcell, warn that efforts focused on mainstreaming locally grown food threaten its democratizing potential (Barnett, et al. 2005; DeLind 2011; Johnston 2008; Johnston, et al. 2009). DeLind (2011:277-278) contends that with the increasing popularity of local and its increasing conventionalization into mainstream markets, local - and the qualities associated with local - is becoming just another commodity attribute, one of many in the marketplace. Observing the practices of big food industry players, DeLind (2011) argues that the food industry reduces local to the easiest attribute to quantify - the number of miles traveled. Geography becomes a proxy for other assumed social, economic, and ecological qualities, which allows multinational corporations to turn their products into “local fare” and promote a beneficent public image of supporting small farms and sustainable agriculture all the while continuing to hide harmful food industry practices (DeLind 2011:277-278; Johnston, et al. 2009). Commenting on Walmart’s activity within the local food movement, DeLind (2011:277) wonders how “David and Goliath” relationships between small farms and powerful food entities will produce anything other than the status quo. How will relationships with “conventionalizing, scale-inducing, structural inequity” fulfill movement claims?

Similarly, Johnston et al (2009), applying the lessons of the conventionalization of organics to local food, observe that corporate food has turned “food democracy” into a commodity. The food industry uses specific marketing strategies, e.g., local and organic labeling, to connote the ideas and values of food democratizing efforts and obscure unchanged industry practices grounded in a priority of profit maximization (Johnston, et al. 2009:525). While food produced with desirable qualities may offer a more sustainable choice to consumers, the growth and realization of food democracy depends on an engaged citizenry. The point of food democratizing efforts is not to develop another label with a

“pre-given, essentialized understanding of social reality” but to open that reality to contestation, to meaningful public engagement and participation (Johnston, et al. 2009:525-527).

As we discuss in the next section, these critiques and warnings have particular relevance for the current turn toward efficiency-based strategies in local food system development efforts.

The Turn Toward Efficiency in the Local Food Movement

Without a doubt, “local food” has captured the imaginations of organizations and activists across the country as a means to promote local or regional economic growth, improve the health and wellness of community members, increase food access, counter obesity trends, improve the viability of small farms and rural communities, and generally wrest some control over the way our food is produced from the industrialized and globally organized food industry. The degree to which local food has penetrated the market and public awareness is evident in the growth nationally of farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), farm to school, hospital, and college programs, in the emergence of food tracks and degree programs at colleges and universities, and in the preponderance of books and other media focused on the ills of the industrialized food system and on local food as a promising alternative. Some of the biggest food industry players - food retailers, wholesalers, fast food chains - have developed local food programs and are using the discourse of local food to attract market demand. Walmart is perhaps the most prominent. In 2010, it rolled out its Heritage Agriculture program and its plans to support sustainable agriculture by committing to sell five billion dollars of food sourced from small and medium sized farms by 2015.

For a movement that seeks to engage and transform the food system, the food industry’s recognition of locally grown food presents both opportunities and challenges. The mainstreaming of locally grown food - its expansion into conventional market outlets - potentially increases its availability to a broader base of consumers and provides smaller scale farms, typically associated with the movement, with market outlets and a means to improve the economic viability of their operations. The reproduction of movement messaging by major food industry players has the potential to expand the reach of movement discourse to a broader constituency.

At the same time, however, there are real contradictions between local food and the conventional food industry. Food industry stakeholders want to source and sell locally grown food. Farmers growing food for local customers want market outlets for their products. Supply and demand exist, but there is a fundamental disconnect between the systems and practices of the established food industry and the qualities typical of locally grown food. By and large, locally grown food does not fit easily into the existing paradigm of food production.

The food procurement systems and practices of retailers are structured in accordance with an industrialized and centralized food industry, itself grounded in neoliberal economic principles and

practices to achieve “efficiencies” of hyper proportions. Production of food in this system happens through large scale specialized agriculture, which is suited to large scale centralized wholesaling and retailing. Big food companies source from a small pool of big suppliers year round and at a price achieved through economies of scale, i.e., through cost savings that come with mass production.

Locally grown food is seasonal, and, in places like Western North Carolina where farms are small by national standards, food production is not scalable to industrial-scale production. In contrast to food produced for the conventional food industry, local food production is the purview of many smaller farms; the scale of production is small and decentralized and currently with limited infrastructure for aggregation, distribution, and processing.

To help local food production meet established food industry standards, some efforts are taking a turn toward efficiency-based solutions. For many, food hubs - central facilities that aim to coordinate the aggregation, storage, processing, and/or the distribution of regionally or locally produced foods from smaller producers - have come to the forefront of strategies. As a means to mediate the logistics between local food and the food industry, the food hub solution has become so appealing that is increasingly dominating local food system building efforts and the direction of USDA and private grant funding. It is also attracting the attention and support of big food industry players. To accelerate the growth of food hubs, Walmart recently invested \$3 million to support efforts to further develop the food hub model and help the company meet their goals of increasing local food sales and reducing costs.

For proponents, food hubs are the solution to expanding local food into the conventional food stream - to scaling-up local food and meeting industry norms. In theory, food hubs bridge the local food-food industry divide by aggregating the production of many smaller scale farms to meet the volume needs of larger retail markets. Large scale markets require large quantities of product, and they want to do business with a few, large suppliers. Smaller farms cannot meet this need individually. Food hubs aim to achieve the volume by aggregating the production of many small and mid-size farms.

In practice, however, food hubs may be able to achieve volume, but they rarely achieve scale. This difference - between volume and scale - and the strategy food hubs are using to address it reveals a deeper conflict between local food and the existing food industry. With scale, large volume producers specialize and spread out their fixed costs over large quantities of production - they make profits of pennies on the pound but produce many pounds. Aggregating the production from small-scale producers cannot achieve the same result. Small volume producers cannot produce profitably on pennies per pound - they do not produce enough pounds. So food hubs need to pay their smaller scale producers more but still compete in markets where price is determined by large scale production. To meet the price points expected by the food industry and those needed by smaller scale operators, the dominant food hub model that has emerged is a subsidized one; it is supported by grants and other outside funding to help cover operating costs (NGFN Food Hub Collaboration 2014). For advocates,

subsidizing such efforts is a legitimate and laudable use of funds. Food hubs offer the means to “scale-up” local food and get more “good food” into more places to more people and provide small farms with viable markets.

As a strategy, however, food hubs (as they are currently conceived) do not offer a means to challenge the principles and practices on which the food industry operates. To access mainstream markets, food hubs strive to meet food industry prices, often subsidizing some of their costs and, in doing so, allow the food industry to dictate the terms of the market relationship. Because they operate to meet established industry norms, they ultimately reaffirm the profit imperative and the market rationality that underlies policies and practices that drive down production costs, depress food industry wages, and compromise standards to protect the environment and the health and well-being of food industry workers. As a logistical solution to the problem of getting local food into mainstream markets, food hubs do nothing to move the food industry. Rather, they enable the food industry to move the movement - to reduce “local” to a geographic accounting, use the assumed merits of local food to claim corporate responsibility, and usurp the democratizing potential of local food system building efforts.

Local Food and Food Democracy

Returning to Born and Purcell’s local trap concept, what infrastructure-focused efforts like food hubs do is conflate means with ends. Consonant with the body of discourse extolling the benefits of locally grown food, a recent Wallace Center publication promoting food hubs - as a key way to increase the efficiency of local food and link local food to larger scale mainstream markets - describes the qualities local food embodies: local food is “good food” - sustainable for the environment and communities, healthy for the body, fair to farmers and food industry workers, accessible to everyone (Cantrell and Heuer 2013). While these are qualities and conditions the local food movement as well as other food movements aspire toward, locally grown food is not inherently any of these things. For these qualities to exist, they must be created, and their creation relies on a process, to draw from Johnston et al (2009:525-526), that democratizes the food system - that lays bare food industry processes and relations of production, empowers people to shape the values, policies, practices, and outcomes of food production systems, and liberates food production from corporate control. This process is about mobilizing participation. Understanding that we must address the excesses and transgressions of the dominant food industry and that we do not yet know what sustainable food systems are going to look like, food democratization is crucial. As argued by Hassanein (2003:78-79), conflicts over food production and the direction of food industry practices are fundamentally about values (and the types of practices and outcomes these values legitimize). Without the participation of the citizenry, an oligarchy of corporations - grounded in a neoliberal ideology, supported by the policies of governments and supranational institutions - gets to define those values, and we consent to them.

Following this framework, what local food presents is a way to activate democratic participation in the food system. By nature of its scale and its association with place, local food offers opportunities to

address conditions that are common to the modern human experience and antithetical to food democratizing efforts - our alienation from food and agriculture and our general estrangement from the places in which we live. Our disconnection from the processes that go into the production of food - simultaneously geographical, social, and ethical - is fundamental to understanding the basis and perpetuation of the social, ecological, and economic “side effects” food industry practices and policies engender. Commenting on the absence of meaningful feedback loops in the food industry, Buttel (1997) wrote that the spatial as well as temporal distances in the global food industry underlie the “sustainability of unsustainability.” Wendell Berry (1992), who has been writing about the impacts of the globalizing economy for more than three decades, has pointed out that because the boundaries of the global economy are so large, we cannot see the impacts of our choices to satisfy our private, household economies. In the global food system, far flung supply chains hide the relationships and impacts of production and food comes to us without history or context. Global consumers have little to no knowledge about how goods are produced - by whom, using what meanings, with what resources. They participate in an economy they know little about and significantly do not recognize their role in its reproduction (Kloppenborg, et al. 1996).

At the same time, our increasing dependence on the land and labor of other places to satisfy our needs and desires means that we are less connected to the communities and people where we live. This disconnection is significant for efforts seeking to mobilize collective action around food system issues (Perrett forthcoming). With the expansion and increasing dominance of a global market, with the rise and the increasing significance of consumer culture, with the increasing reliance on electronic media and technology, community ties have eroded - people have become increasingly alienated from one another and are less likely to participate in activities that build community relations (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995).

Scholars and social thinkers have long considered the importance of social interaction for civic engagement and democracy. Social interaction and the familiarity, social bonds, and reciprocal relations that develop are the basis of community building and social action (Coleman 1988; Diani 1997; Paxton 2002; Putnam 1995; Putnam 2001; Woolcock 1998; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). The emergence of collective action depends on networks of social interaction - spaces of interpersonal communication that facilitate the flow of information, discussion, and the development of shared knowledge and rationalities. Habermas (1984, 1989, 2000; Randall 2008), writing about conditions in current stage of capitalism, late capitalism, discusses the loss of “public spheres” or spaces where members of a community come together to interact, discuss matters of public importance, develop mutual understandings, and work toward shared goals. As argued by Habermas, in late capitalism, instrumental rationality - supported by media corporatism - has replaced a communicative rationality, one grounded in and guided by interpersonal interaction and reasoned discussion. Similarly, Paxton (2002), in her study of emerging democracies, has argued that processes that build social bonds are vital to promoting democratic participation - processes that facilitate dialogue, allow for the expression of dissenting

opinions, and build respect for different points of view. In their exploration of “history making” - that is, efforts that can fundamentally change the way we view and act in the world, Spinoza et al (1999) suggest the significance of place for democratizing efforts. They argue that cultural innovation and the impulse to act in ways that challenge taken for granted cultural norms do not emerge from positions of detachment but from a deep connectedness or rootedness with the conditions and particularities of place.

These ideas have enormous relevance for thinking about local food system building efforts - for their capacity to challenge “anti-democratic forces of control” (Hassanein 2003:83) and the kinds of strategies and actions these efforts use in support of food system change (Perrett forthcoming). Departing from these ideas and from the notion that food system change requires active citizenry engagement, local food system development, while subsuming the work to get local food to markets, is really a social process - one that builds the capacity of people to act. The work of local food system building efforts is a process of community building that anchors agriculture in the conditions of place - building human relationships around the processes of food production and provision, building conceptual links between food production and the human and natural resources required to produce food, changing the way eaters think about and relate to food and agriculture, embedding acts of consumption in shared values.

Twenty years ago in Western North Carolina, early movement organizers, witnessing the impacts of the global economy on the region, recognized that the way to regain some autonomy over the direction of community development and the changes happening in Western North Carolina communities, was to directly engage the public. “Local food” was a means to connect the public with this place and to instill an appreciation for a place fundamentally defined by a history and culture of agriculture. The Local Food Campaign was conceived and enacted to politicize the region’s residents through increased knowledge (about the dominant food industry, about the significance of the region’s farms to the region’s character and quality of life) and empower them to create a transparent food system grounded in local relationships, in the skills and knowledge of local people, and in the region’s ecological opportunities and limitations.

For movement organizers here, the creation of spaces of engagement around the processes of food production and provision has and continues to be the foundation of movement work. Spaces of engagement - farmers markets, CSAs, farm tours, local food guides, seasonal events and festivals, school gardens, and other venues that bring community members together around food and agriculture - (re)introduce food production into the realm of human experience and knowledge. They provide venues where community members can interact, socialize, share knowledge, discuss issues and ideas relevant to themselves and their families, develop knowledge about the community, and forge community bonds. In these spaces, participants engage in practices around food and eating that embody different meanings and values and, in their doing, disrupt entrenched food industry relationships and the meanings that

govern them (Perrett 2013; Perrett forthcoming).

The changes in Western North Carolina since the launch of the Local Food Campaign fifteen years ago are palpable - in the region's emerging local food system, in the proliferation of tailgate markets and CSAs, in the growth of support for Farm to School programs by teachers, parents, and school nutrition directors, in the emergence of food policy councils, in the food systems studies of universities and colleges, in the integration of Farm to School principles in the curricula of university teaching and nutrition degree programs, in the public discourse around local food and farms.

With increasing interest in locally grown food across the country, many of these changes are also echoed nationally. They signal a shift in the public social consciousness around agriculture and food, an increasing awareness that the predominant way in which we produce food has to change, an increasing desire to take action to change it. More and more people want to know about the food they are eating and they are questioning the practices of the dominant food industry, but the food democratization process requires a broadening and deepening of the public dialogue.

As a strategy for local food system development, food hubs too often are primarily focused on moving product - increasing the efficiency of small-scale, decentralized local food to meet the norms and expectations of the food industry. Given the concentrated and centralized nature of the dominant food system, infrastructure certainly has a place in developing local food systems. But to fundamentally change the food system, movement strategies and actions need to focus on moving people in their perceptions and practices as consumers and as civic actors. Developing local food systems will have to address gaps in infrastructure, but solutions to gaps must fit within a broader, more fundamental effort that is striving not just to change the geography of food production but the meanings and values - and accordingly practices - that underlie it. Without this critical work, local food is reduced to a geographic location, and it loses its ability to politicize, to open food production to meaningful public engagement and participation, and to empower us to actively shape the characteristics of the food we eat and the way the food system works.

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