

# From the Local to the Global: The Politics of Food Systems

Written by Caitlin Michelle Scott

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CAITLIN MICHELLE SCOTT, OCT 17 2015

How can we bring about a food system that provides food security and health to all in a sustainable way? The current food system is dependent on unsustainable ecological, social, and economic practices (Clapp 2012, Foresight 2011, Conway 2012) while concurrently failing to bring about justice and health to the 795 million hungry (FAO et al. 2015), or the nearly 1.5 billion overweight and obese (WHO 2013, Moodie et al. 2013). Local food systems (LFS) and alternative food networks (AFNs) have been celebrated opportunities across the spectrum of advocates for sustainable food. Despite gaining significant momentum, they still represent fairly small inroads to a very large problem. This trend also sits uncomfortably next to another: continued increasing corporate concentration and control throughout the food system.

Unfortunately, these two trends are not uncommon in a system that is often bifurcated on a variety of issues. While many actors present solutions, countless times, these responses uphold the status quo or do not truly address the fundamental issues we face. Two contributing factors to this impasse are the political nature of many issues of the food system, and the complexity and scale within which these problems arise. In a recent special issue of *Canadian Food Studies*, the guest editors perceive, “an emerging divide between locally- and globally-oriented critical food studies in Canada” (Clapp et al. 2015). This development is consistent with critical food studies more broadly and is part of a larger dichotomy amongst those who research food systems. The following will explore the growing trend of advocacy and scholarship on local and alternative food systems that occur next to increasing corporate concentration and globalization. As advocates for a sustainable and healthy food system, we must strive to move beyond rigid notions of scale and at the same time engage with the messy questions of governance and politics across these scales.

### Local and Alternative Food Systems

In spite of an immense amount of knowledge and writing on local food systems and alternative food networks, they are contested and continue to evolve (Eriksen 2013, Tregear 2011). Eriksen (2013) finds that throughout the literature on local food, three themes are consistent: geographical proximity, relational proximity and values proximity. Similarly, Mount (2012) finds that the reconnection of producer and consumer, shared values, as well as “alternativeness” were important factors for local food. Generally, AFNs encompass diverse arrangements including everything from farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture, fair trade producer cooperatives, buying clubs, food hubs, farm-to-school programs, and beyond (Goodman et al. 2012). AFNs are most importantly, “different” from the conventional notions of food provisioning that we have come to expect in much of the developed world (Tregear, 2011).

### How Much of the Food System Does Local and Alternative Food Occupy?

While local and alternative food systems have seen explosive growth in the last decade, they still remain a relatively small portion of the global food system. In 2012, only 7.8% of farms in the United States sold to local markets (USDA, 2015). Other studies have also found that many farmers sell to both local and conventional markets, with only a small proportion (25-30%) of their sales going to local or alternatives (Brown and Miller 2008). Some producers may also

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prefer conventional chains as a more stable source of income (Ibery and May 2005). Like producers, consumers also dip in and out of conventional and alternative systems. A study of Ontario farmers' market (FM) shoppers found that most respondents averaged only 30% of their total grocery shop at FMs (Smithers, 2008). Shoppers have also reported their willingness to sacrifice their values for the sake of cost or time savings found in conventional retailers (McEacheran et al. 2010). Tregear (2011) points out that consumer studies often focus solely on the reasons why consumers choose to shop local, and rarely look at why they choose not to. She notes that the quality and safety concerns often reported in literature on alternative and local food systems, are in fact rarely reported as the main concern for consumers (Tregear 2011, Enteleca 2000, IGD 2005). There is a tendency for the consumer experience to be presented as entirely positive, but much of the food purchased through local and alternative means requires more time and effort by the consumer in planning, shopping and cooking (Tregear, 2011). Thus, we see that despite their growth, local and alternative food systems still represent a small portion of the system as a whole, and the motivations for participation may not always be as straightforward as expressed in the literature.

An important distinction that speaks to the need for more work across scales is the fact that conventional and local/alternative are often placed in opposition to each other, when in fact this is a false dichotomy. A number of scholars have critiqued AFN scholarship for the bifurcation of food systems into conventional (bad) and alternative (good), when in fact they are intertwined, evolving and borrow from each other (Holloway et al. 2007; Sonnino and Marsden 2006). The hybridity of the system, and the fluidity with which it operates, calls for a logic that appreciates the contextual politics in place. As Clapp et al. (2015) argue,

food systems are multi-scalar by nature in that they are constituted by complex and dynamic local-global and global-local flows of seeds, agricultural practices and systems, price signals, social customs, consumer tastes, models of regulation, and perhaps most importantly, forms and sites of political struggles and solidarity (2).

The false dichotomy set up between local and global tends to entrench ideas about the validity of the local, while ignoring the challenges to that local which arise from the global politics of trade, food security, corporate concentration and globalization. It also ignores the potential for hybrid systems that take into account that local may not always be more environmentally or socially advantageous (Edwards-Jones 2010, Dupuis and Goodman 2005, Goodman et al. 2012).

## Corporate Concentration

Meanwhile, the scale of corporate concentration in agricultural commodity chains continues to deepen. The United States National Agricultural Statistics Service conducts a Census of Agriculture every 5 years. The latest data shows that there continues to be a decrease in the number of total farms coupled with an increase in the average size of farm (USDA, 2014a, p. 7). Simultaneously, there has been an increase in corporate owned farms while family and individual farm numbers decrease (USDA 2014a). In 2012, the survey also found that 66% of the total value of agricultural products sold came from just 3.8% of the total number of farms (USDA, 2014a, p. 9). These statistics present a picture of rural reality that continues on a narrow path, one that sits in contrast to the goals and aesthetics of local food systems.

Corporate concentration plays out beyond the farm, in every aspect of the food system globally. At the input level, "the top 10 global seed companies control 75.3 percent of commercial seed sales. The world's 10 leading pesticide companies control 94.5 percent of sales. But, six of the biggest pesticide manufacturers are also six of the biggest seed companies and together, these six control 75 percent of all private sector crop research" (Mooney 2015, p. 121). Corporate trading firms, also known as the ABCDs (ADM, Bunge, Cargill, and Louis-Dreyfus) control over 70 percent of the global grain market (Murphy, Burch, & Clapp, 2012, p. 9), and are now moving from simply traders to becoming what Clapp (2015, p. 126) calls "cross-sectoral value chain managers". In the meat industry, concentration remains high across the board, with over 60% of pork slaughtered and packaged by the top four firms (USDA 2014b) and over 50% of the U.S. broiler chicken market controlled by the top four (Weaver 2014), as just two examples.

While processors and manufacturers continue to have relatively low concentration compared to the rest of the food system, the top 10 food and beverage manufacturers earned 37% of the revenue of the top world's top 100. The top

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3 corporations (Nestlé, PepsiCo and Kraft) earned 45% of the top 10 (ETC Group, 2011). Processors and manufacturers have also been consistently more concentrated, with mergers and acquisitions common (FWW, 2013).

On the retail front, statistics from between 2009 and 2012 show that the majority of developed countries had 5 or less retailers controlling between 50 and 90% of the market share of groceries (CI 2012, FWW, 2013). Notable examples include Australia where 2 retailers control 71% of the market, or Portugal where 3 retailers control 90% of the market share (CI 2012).

## Impacts of Corporate Concentration

When four-firm concentration is over 40%, it is considered risky by economists. As seen, much of the global food system far exceeds this concentration and the outcomes for both consumers and producers are often negative. First, corporate concentration at the level of inputs has been shown to decrease innovation and biodiversity (Mooney, 2015). Beyond inputs, corporate concentration has negative impacts on food security by affecting prices, and sustainability, with little incentive for non-brand name entities to show real performance on environmental goals (Clapp, 2015). Concentration at the retail level hurts both consumers and producers. Producers have become powerless to unforeseen fees and cancellations, and often face downward pressures on supply prices (CI 2012). Meanwhile, consumers lose with increased prices, less choice (despite increased perceived choice), and manipulation of shopping habits through a variety of advertising and behavioural changes in store (FWW 2013, CI 2012).

## Politics and Power at all Scales

In their book, *Alternative Food Networks*, Goodman et al. (2012) argue for a politics in place, rather than a politics of place, quoting Amin (2002: 397), they note the need for,

a non-territorial way of viewing place politics in an age of global connectivity. Instead of seeing political activity as unique, places might be seen as sites which juxtapose the varied politics – the local, national, and global – that we find today. What matters is this juxtaposition.

Amin's concept is useful to conceptualize, "political activity in places as plural, open, and contested" (ibid 397). Doing so is important for academics who study alternatives at different scales because it forces a broader look at the politics of scale that may affect the outcomes, as well as forcing us to withhold assumptions about politics of the local that might be anticipated as inherent to the phenomenon studied. Politics in place also forces academics to look beyond the scale at which they are working to contextualize the outcomes within politics of the regional, national and global.

The need to understand politics and power at all scales of the food system cannot be understated. Within the scholarship on AFNs, a noted disciplinary split between urban and rural sociology leaves politics between the elite middle class in cities and the food producers in rural areas ignored (Goodman et al. 2012, p. 19). These dynamics are critical to understand given that urban areas often drive demand for local food. Urban-rural linkages also become increasingly important with the trend toward increased urbanization, and become critical for cross-disciplinary research and new, complex notions of food security and sustainability in these growing spaces of politics.

Finally, a politics in place creates opportunities to understand not only the dynamics between scales, but also the dynamics at scale. What are the political undercurrents in a rural reality that puts local and alternative food systems next to each other? How does deepening corporate concentration affect the prospects for local and alternative systems to scale up and grow? These questions bring together the politics of different scales to study how these realities play out on the ground.

## Conclusion

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In their 2006 article, Born and Purcell (pg. 195-196) note that, “no matter what its scale, the outcomes produced by a food system are contextual: they depend on the actors and agendas that are empowered by the particular social relations in a given food system”. These social relations are inherently complex and involve linkages between the global and local. They also exist in a space that is often dominated by a global system of economic exchange, which challenges alternatives. Thus, the struggle is political, and this politics in place must be studied as the multi-scalar and complex entity it is. Authors have done this successfully, conceptualizing local case studies in the context of broader global policy initiatives and processes (see Hawkes et al. 2010, Kimura 2014). Studies like this must continue to be explored, with increased emphasis on cross-disciplinary re-theorising on the politics of food systems at many scales.

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