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Is ‘local food’ sustainable? Localism, social justice, equity and sustainable food futures

Rebecca Duell

Abstract

Intensive agri-industrial food systems in facing old and new sustainability challenges are now confronted with emergent ‘alternatives’, particularly local food systems, that pose transformational pathways for strong sustainability. But important questions are raised about the role local food will play in the creation of sustainable food futures, including: Are local food systems sustainable? Can they offer a socially just replacement to agri-industrial systems, or will they simply replicate the problems of the past or create new ones? These questions, in turn, are underpinned by the fundamental question: What exactly does ‘sustainability’ mean in the context of food futures?

Introduction

In a recent report for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Adams & Jeanrenaud (2008: 3) ask the following question, “How do we devise strategies for society that will allow a peaceful, equitable, fulfilled human future: a humane future for a diverse earth?” Present day sustainability is acutely concerned with answering this question. Peace, equity and diversity are values increasingly incorporated into discourses of sustainability that have, in past mainstream practice at least, primarily been concerned with economic or ecological outcomes (Redclift, 2005; Boström, 2012). These values highlight a widespread and growing recognition that socially focussed strategies are required to address “society-oriented definitions” of sustainability challenges, which involve people as much as nonhuman nature (Becker et al, 1999: 4). Thus, sustainability is not only about resolving ecological or economic imperatives. Sustainability also involves the analysis of socially-shaped

processes and relationships within and between societies, which are implicated in the creation of both social and ecological injustice. As Becker et al., (1999) note in their seminal book on the study of sustainability within the social sciences, “sustainability turns out to be closely linked to supposedly ‘internal’ problems of social structure, such as social justice, gender equality, and political participation.” This article explores the implications of taking a socially focussed perspective on sustainability to the study of local food systems.

As both Adams and Jeanrenaud (2008) and Becker et al. (1999) show, a socially focussed perspective on sustainability is informed by the key principles of social justice and equity. Fundamental to social justice are notions of freedom and rights, which have implications for people’s safe and fair representation and participation in civic and social life, for example. In a sustainability context, equity refers to both intragenerational equity (between people now) and intergenerational equity (between present and future generations). Equity is primarily concerned with matters of distribution, implicated in the widening gap between rich and poor between *and* within many countries, and increasingly geographically stratified ecological degradation (Gibson et al., 2005). Social justice and equity are crucial to long-term sustainability imperatives because they expose underlying social and economic conditions that lead to unsustainable states, for example, they link excessive consumption in developed nations with ecological degradation in developing countries (Rees & Westra, 2003). Importantly, they also challenge strategies for sustainability that effectively maintain these conditions. Both principles share a commitment to fair and equal access to decision-making processes. Achieving a more sustainable society is, therefore, dependent on realising higher levels of material and social equality, including economic and political equality (Agyeman et al., 2003; Schlosberg, 2004). Without social justice and equity, collaborative and inclusive dialogues that allow for equal partnerships and the

co-construction of alternate sustainability strategies will continue to be marginalised in sustainability debates.

Throughout this article, the different aspects of a socially focussed perspective for sustainability will be teased out, and these arguably oblique ideas about social processes, relationships, equity and justice will be elaborated on. Moreover, although the social and ecological dimensions of sustainability are inextricably linked, this article focusses largely on the social dimension due to its underrepresentation in sustainability theory and practice (Lehtonen, 2004; Littig & Grießler, 2005; Vallance et al., 2011).

The emergence of local food systems for sustainability

Local food systems are characterised by short food supply chains (FAAN, 2010). They include ‘community supported agriculture’ (CSA) initiatives, farmers markets, community gardens, the ‘locavore’ or ‘100 mile diet’ movements, ‘permablitzing’, ‘guerrilla gardening’, and the territorial or regional labelling of food products. Local food systems sit under the umbrella term of alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs), which Whatmore and Thorne (1997: 289) define as:

Social and environmental configurations of agro-food production and consumption that coexist with those of industrial food corporations but which in some way counter, or resist, their institutional values or practices.

These new configurations of production and consumption represent emergent social phenomena, and as such, they have inspired a new field of study within the social sciences and beyond. Specifically, local food systems have been analysed from both “product in place” and “process in place” frameworks (Maye et al., 2007: 2). Within wider trends of cultural and rural revival, ‘product in place’ frameworks focus primarily on the potential of (re)localised food supply chains to protect and promote regional foods and traditional

methods of production. Alternatively, ‘process in place’ frameworks attempt to “offer more distinctive oppositional socio-economic interrogations to improve livelihoods and local wellbeing” (Maye, et al., 2007: 3). Process in place research often explains producer and consumer participation in local food systems as a rejection of, or resistance to, the agri-industrial food system and the social, ecological and economic disadvantages this system manufactures.

As such, local food systems are increasingly championed as a key solution to the unsustainability of industrialised, intensive and corporate systems of food provisioning (Kloppenburg et al., 1996; Starr, 2010). A burgeoning literature attests to escalating international concerns about agri-industrial food systems. These systems have become so dysfunctional that several commentators have declared them to be systems ‘in crisis’ (e.g. Lang, 2010; Magdoff & Tokar, 2010). Notable social and ecological symptoms and impacts of this food crisis include loss of small farmer livelihoods (Altieri, 2009); depletion of key natural resources, especially water and soil fertility and a dramatic increase in soil, air and water pollution (Foley et al., 2011); diminishing biodiversity (Perfecto & Vandermeer, 2008); and dangerously fluctuating, but continually increasing food prices (Lagi et al., 2011). Subsequently, while levels of diet related diseases rise in the global north, malnutrition and widespread hunger are at epidemic levels in many regions of the global south (Gardner & Halweil, 2000; De Schutter, 2009). Devising new strategies to feed the world’s growing population in an equitable and humane way is clearly urgent.

Such contexts of sustainability and food crisis then beg the question informing this article: What kind of pathway to a sustainable food future can local food offer? This is of further import to ask in relation to long-term sustainability imperatives due to the limited application of an explicit sustainability lens to the analysis of local food systems. This is especially the case in New Zealand and Australia. Deeper understanding of the transformative

potential of local food systems is required because, as Hinrichs (2010: 9) argues:

Moving society towards more sustainable food systems requires empirical study of current problems in the agriculture and food system, *as well as* critical scrutiny of potential and proposed improvements or solutions (emphasis added).

This statement highlights the importance of critically examining the role local food could play when devising sustainability strategies or pathways, especially in the face of wider popular discourses that position local food systems as a panacea for all that is wrong with the agri-industrial food system (e.g. Pollan, 2006).

Of course, the above question, in turn, raises many more important questions about sustainability and food. This article focuses on three central ones that appear to underpin this area of research. What does ‘sustainable’ exactly mean? A straightforward and basic question at first glance, but the concept of sustainability is widely interpreted. The interpretative quality of sustainability has been described by some as a key weakness, though it is claimed by others to be an important strength (Jacobs, 1999). Given this lack of clarity, it is important to define the approach to sustainability that this article takes. The second question asked is what is a sustainable food system? And finally, what challenges are revealed when local food systems are analysed from these sustainability perspectives? In responding to these questions this article reviews two main literatures – on sustainability, and on alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs).

What is sustainability?

Although sustainability is a concept that has been in popular use for over forty years, it is largely accepted that sustainability has a range of meanings and is not often clearly defined (Jacobs, 1999; Redclift, 2005). Some definitions

prioritise an ecological ethic, for example, whilst others emphasise principles of economic growth. Differing definitions of sustainability highlight the concept as socially and politically value-constructed, which is often underpinned by a number of normative imperatives or principles (Littig & Grießler, 2005). The call for justice for future generations so as to not impinge on their opportunities and capabilities to live sustainably is one such normative imperative. This diversity in meaning and interpretation has led to the development of a range of sustainability approaches or paradigms, including steady-state theory, sustainable development and free-market environmentalism.

This plurality of definitions illustrates that sustainability is an open ended concept. As Bossel (1998: 7) argues, there is no “unique state of sustainability”. It is instead a perspective on the long term viability of the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world that is inherently dynamic. Gibson et al. (2005: 60) argue that this relationship is complex, as social and ecological systems are linked in “open, dynamic and multi-scalar” ways. Consequently, sustainability must be able to respond to, and incorporate, at times unanticipated rapid ecological change and social transformation.

Sustainability is, therefore, as much about principles and processes, as it is about achieving measurable predetermined goals. Principles may include intragenerational equity, which incorporates material and political equality, or the precautionary principal (Gibson, et al., 2005). Processes include economic and social structures and relationships, including cultural value systems, which establish and maintain inequitable levels and methods of production and consumption, social hierarchies, standards of living, and divisions of labour, for example (Becker, et al., 1999). They also include decision making processes, which when transformed, Gibson et al. (2005: 61) argue can challenge “conventional thinking and practice” on issues of “progress, development and well-being.” Given the importance of principles and processes for sustainability there can be no quick fix, nor singular lasting solution to sustainability

challenges that are both social and ecological in nature, such as the food crisis. Sustainability can, therefore, be envisioned as both a means to an end, as well as end in itself.

As a starting point for sustainability-as-process, Becker et al. (1999: 6) contend sustainability should be defined negatively, that is to “identify states and processes that are unsustainable”. Both unsustainable states and processes are evident in agri-industrial systems of food provisioning. The identification of this lack of sustainability has informed the creation of different pathways leading away from agri-industrial food systems. The aim of these different, or ‘alternative’, pathways is to create new strategies for a sustainable food future. As Becker et al. (1999: 6) advance, such pathways require “a conceptual shift from categories of preservation to categories of change and transformation”. Preservationist thinking seeks to maintain current social and economic structures or ecological qualities, usually in isolation from each other. Consequently, categories of preservation fail to acknowledge sustainability as relational and conceptually dynamic.

Local food, agroecology, and consumer buying cooperatives are all examples of claimed transformational pathways to a sustainable food future, and can be considered ‘categories of transformation’. However, Becker et al. (1999) are careful to point out that developing such pathways successfully will require a certain amount of guidance to ensure pathways remain focused on disrupting current structures and relationships that cause and maintain the status quo, as well as creating the necessary conditions for social transformation. Guidance can be established via the process of answering questions like what do we want to sustain, why and for how long? And crucially when thinking about issues of social justice and equity, for whom?

As the socio-ecological impacts of agri-industrial food systems grow worse there is an increasing need to better identify and investigate current responses, including approaches to sustainability that may themselves be acting as

‘categories of preservation’. It is through this identification and evaluation that pathways and approaches to sustainability that provide processes of ‘change and transformation’ can reveal themselves. A useful and increasingly popular way to evaluate sustainability initiatives involves locating a social-ecological mix of principles and processes, both theoretically and practically, along a continuum of sustainability from ‘weak’ to ‘strong’. In keeping with the focus of the article, only the social principles and processes are discussed.

Weak to strong sustainability: a framework for analysis

The classification of sustainability approaches as weak to strong originated in the field of ecological economics (Hediger, 1999; Dovers, 2005). The original weak-strong typology is based on the idea of ‘substitutability’, although it has broadened in scope to better incorporate the social context in which substitution takes place (Ang & Van Passel, 2012). Simply put, substitutability theorises the ways in which one type of capital may be substituted for another. As Dovers (2005: 53) explains,

Weak sustainability assumes that natural capital (resources, species, assimilative capacity and so on) can generally be substituted by human-made capital, thus sustaining human wellbeing over time. The position of strong sustainability proposes that natural capital cannot always or even mostly be substituted by human-made capital, with the implication that limits to human use of resources and environmental assets are real and close.

Dovers (2005) further argues that a variety of positions between either weak or strong sustainability exist on a continuum, as concessions are made between the two opposing poles.

Weak sustainability can be described as an economic growth-orientated, technocratic and incremental approach to sustainability (Williams & Millington, 2004). It is underpinned by the dominant rationalities of capitalism and

industrialism, which include continued processes of ‘modernisation’ for both the global North and South (Adams, 2009). Economic growth, free trade and development are guiding principles (Bossel, 1998). Importantly, it is the expansion of capitalism and industrialism that will lead to the accumulation of wealth and scientific knowledge, which will supposedly enable social, technological and ecological limitations of development to be overcome.

Weak sustainability thus places a high value or prominence on technological progress/prowess to realise sustainability. The substitution of natural capital with human-made capital relies on technological innovation and expert problem solving approaches (Williams & Millington, 2004; Ang & Van Passel, 2012). However, technological solutions allow little space for the development of sustainability-as-process approaches as they are ends or outcome driven. The rapid development and adoption of agro-biotechnology, most recently represented by the ‘doubly green revolution’ of genetically modified (GM) crops (Hindmarsh, 2004), is an example of how technological solutions (although highly controversial) have been enthusiastically adopted under the banner of sustainability (e.g. Monsanto Company, n.d). However, aiming to increase the productive capacity of food systems does little to address socio-economic structures and relationships implicated in the inequitable local and global distribution of food, for example.

Returning to Becker et al.’s (1999) suggestion that sustainability should be defined negatively, in response to unsustainable states and processes, the underlying principles and processes informing transformational strong sustainability approaches can also be defined in response to weak approaches to sustainability. Lessons learnt from the failures of sustainable development, for example, allow for the construction of much stronger ideas about what will be involved journeying along pathways towards sustainability (the means), as well as what the destination may look like (the end).

Strong sustainability is a transformational, process-orientated approach to change that recognises ecological limits and the interconnection between these limits and the social contexts or infrastructures of sustainability. Crucially, because of the ecological destruction excessive economic growth brings and the propensity for wealth to concentrate in the hands of a powerful few, strong sustainability approaches reject the notion that exponential economic growth is possible or desirable (Daly, 2008; Ang & Van Passel, 2012). Reducing demand on the Earth's limited natural resources is instead a central focus (e.g. Jackson, 2008). One key way of reducing demand is to cease defining wealth and wellbeing only in terms of the acquisition of material goods.

In support of Becker et al.'s (1999) contention that sustainability needs to involve a shift towards 'categories of transformation', strong approaches to sustainability advocate fundamental rather than incremental change (Agyeman, et al., 2003; Dobson, 2007; Ang & Van Passel, 2012). Transformation implies long-term, systemic, and cross-cutting change to existing social, economic and political decision-making processes mentioned above. These changes are required to improve human equality and wellbeing, particularly of the poor and marginalised. Specific processes and principles that enable social change include bottom-up collective action, decentralisation, local innovation responses, inclusive governance and collective ideas of wellbeing (Schlosberg, 2004; Connelly et al., 2011). Arguably, social change must occur in tandem with appropriate technological change.

Issues of social justice and equity are highlighted as being intimately bound up in the processes and structures that cause and maintain unsustainable social-ecological systems, such as the agri-industrial food system (Agyeman, 2008; Altieri, 2009). It is in this context that Agyeman (2008: 752) makes the important point that,

If sustainability is to become a process with the power to transform, as opposed to its current environmental, stewardship or reform focus, justice and equity issues need to be incorporated into its very core.

Key to the incorporation of social justice and equity into sustainability strategies is understanding how class, gender, cultural and ethnic inequality, for example, impacts on people's use of and access to resources, wealth distribution and democratic participation (Allen & Sachs, 1993; Schlosberg, 2004). Furthermore, inequality and injustice stratify society, reduce social interaction and cooperation, leading to a breakdown in shared senses of citizenship and collective social and ecological responsibility (Bossel, 1998). Consequently, achieving collaborative and coherent social and political action for sustainability at both bottom-up and top-down levels can be a challenge, as reaching consensus between groups with disparate needs and different levels of social and political power is difficult. Often, the interests of more powerful groups with vested interests can dominate discussions or negotiations, leading to the marginalisation of less influential groups point of view, or proposed sustainability strategies (e.g. Vanloqueren & Baret, 2009). Inequality then is an important factor to address to enable the self-determination and participation of all stakeholders in the co-construction of mutually beneficial and appropriate sustainability strategies (see also Schlosberg, 2004). If the material and discursive causes of inequality are not addressed, strategies for sustainability risk perpetuating the status quo.

Sustainable food systems

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the open-ended and contested nature of sustainability, there is no definitive and universally agreed upon definition for, or understanding of, a sustainable food system. The disparity between sustainability approaches seeking to overcome the food crisis is no more evident than in proposed responses to the threat of climate change. For example, while

some authors stress the need for the production of drought-resistant crops via biotechnological innovation (Ang & Van Passel, 2012), others continue to champion the resiliency of small ‘peasant’ farms to climatic extremes (Altieri, 2009). By way of contrast, in Australia, where climate change is a particularly salient topic, recent research has focussed on the inability of neoliberal agricultural governance structures to address predicted climate change-induced increases in food insecurity and ecological degradation (Lawrence et al., 2013). The specifics of a sustainable food system are clearly up for debate. However, if we accept the overall need for a strong sustainability approach, it is possible to provide a general picture of the key principles and processes necessary for a more effective and equitable sustainable food system.

For example, Allen et al. (1991) propose a definition for sustainable agriculture that can be applied to a sustainable food system more widely. For the authors, a sustainable food system is one that “equitably balances concerns of environmental soundness, economic viability, and social justice among all sectors of society” (Allen et al., 1991: 37). The authors argue sustainability must not only extend to future generations, but also include consideration for the welfare of current generations, as well as the welfare of nonhuman nature. Reflecting strong sustainability theory, their definition explicitly includes social justice for *all* people as a key principle for food system sustainability.

This definition is over twenty years old. However, even a brief review of more recent literature illustrates its contemporary relevancy (e.g. Kloppenburg et al., 2000; Perfecto & Vandermeer, 2008; Fernandez et al., 2013). As Fernandez et al. (2013: 122) argue,

The growing links between the environment, health, food security, poverty, and social justice reflect an emerging systemic understanding of agriculture as a social and ecological activity in addition to an economic one.

A sustainable food system is, therefore, not just about achieving economic viability and on-farm sustainability, but is also underpinned by wider social and ecological concerns, such as community food security, fair labour practices, food safety, equitable access to food and the means to produce food, healthy ecosystems and animal welfare.

Successfully addressing these concerns will rely on a sustainability-as-process approach if the failures of more ends or outcome driven responses are to be avoided. To recall, strong sustainability emphasises the need for systemic social and economic change, rather than primarily technological innovation, to address the inequality inherent in more corporate and industrial food systems. As Gliessman (2011: 349) convincingly contends,

Current systems cannot be tweaked or “improved” without major restructuring of all aspects of the food system, from the field to the table. This includes social, economic, and political structures. A strong stand has to be taken if real change is going to happen. Otherwise the resistance to change ingrained in conventional food systems is too strong.

Fernandez, et al. (2013) argue a strong stand may be accomplished if various agriculture and food movements working for social change collaborate, to produce participatory, transdisciplinary and action-based research, for example. They argue that agroecology, which applies ecological principles to agricultural planning, could be strengthened by engaging with alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs), such as localised urban food justice initiatives. Linking local action to a larger political agenda is considered a key process for engendering change. However, in both production and consumption contexts, it is unclear to what extent emergent ‘alternatives’, such as localism initiatives, can act as transformational pathways for strong sustainability.

Local food and sustainability

Local food systems offer dynamic, interactive and highly socially constructed spaces for analysis. However, only a small amount of research has been undertaken specifically on local food systems in Australasia, with farmers markets and community gardens representing two primary empirical sites for observation and data collection (Cameron, 2007; Chalmers et al., 2009; Andrée et al., 2010; Evers & Hodgson, 2011; Turner, 2011). The literature, however, reveals a significant gap in relation to understanding the transformational potential of local food systems as sustainability strategies.

In terms of research to date, few explicit sustainability perspectives have been applied to local food system analysis. When the sustainability of local food systems is analysed, it generally reflects a widely acknowledged bias in the international AAFN literature towards exploring the ecological or economic dimensions of sustainability (Trauger, 2007). For example, Andrée's (2009) study in the State of Victoria, Australia, examined the ways local food hoped to counter ecological degradation caused by more conventional food supply chains. Other studies have focused on the potential of local food to contribute to the revitalisation of the rural agri-food sector within Australia and New Zealand's specific political-economic climates (Guthrie et al., 2006; Cameron, 2007; Andrée et al., 2010). Although the more social characteristics of local food is discussed, such as local food's capacity to strengthen community-based activities, the creation of new wealth is still positioned as the main basis for the sustainability of local food systems. Small scale local food initiatives, for example, are often considered to be ideal avenues for small businesses to test or promote new products, which are often also sold in larger 'conventional' outlets such as supermarkets (Guthrie et al., 2006). However, such activity does little to expand local food initiatives beyond niche markets selling specialist or artisanal products, which often have a premium price tag and claimed health or 'environmentally friendly' effects. Consequently, people on low incomes are

excluded from enjoying the benefits of these ‘sustainable’ products, and the product has a relatively limited uptake and impact.

Broadening the scope of literature review to the related and overlapping field of sustainable agriculture reveals a much wider array of studies that specifically explore social aspects of sustainable food provisioning in Australasia (Lockie et al., 2000; Campbell et al., 2012; Larder et al., 2012). However, explicit engagement with questions of social justice and equity is often missing here as well, particularly around matters of participation and exclusion, and the negative implications this has for strong sustainability approaches. Again, this reflects a wider historical trend in the international literature that has either focussed on alternative production techniques as technical solutions to ecological problems, or emphasised the potential profitability of sustainable food production in filling niche markets (Trauger, 2007; De Lind, 2011). Of late, the social justice and equity deficit is starting to be acknowledged and addressed, with research drawing on food justice or food sovereignty perspectives (e.g. Mares & Peña, 2011; Sbicca, 2012).

Returning to specific literature on local food systems in New Zealand and Australia, the prioritisation of economic and ecological sustainability outcomes is problematic and needs to be addressed. Quite simply, attention needs to be given to the social context within which these economic and ecological aspects of sustainability are woven. One source of knowledge that can contribute to analysing Australasian local food is the large body of scholarly work originating in North America that presents a strong critique of local food systems, with clear applicability to the discussion of sustainability presented thus far. Specifically, local food systems have been critiqued on the basis that they often fail to address social justice and equity deficits inherent in more conventionalised food system relationships.

But, can this critique be applied to local food systems in an Australasian context? There are several noteworthy differences between the North American

and Australasian agri-food sectors. New Zealand and Australia's unique socio-political and geographic contexts have influenced the productivist and export-orientated models of agricultural development present in both countries (Burch et al., 1999; Lawrence, et al., 2013). Both countries also represent two of the most neoliberalised agricultural production systems globally. This situation poses unique challenges to Australasian local food systems. For instance, Australia's export-orientated policy environment has resulted in little federal or state support for producers selling to local markets (Andrée, et al., 2010).

Moreover, the North American agri-food sector is differentiated between large scale, intensive, corporate agriculture on one hand, and small scale, local farming and food systems on the other. Allen and Wilson (2008) argue corporate agriculture has compounded pre-existing inequality, by heightening food insecurity among women, people of colour, and agricultural workers, for example. Australasian agrifood systems have not suffered the same levels of intensification and corporatisation. Lower instances of polarisation between large and small scale agriculture have led to difficulty in clearly differentiating between 'conventional' and 'alternative' producers and food systems, leaving room for hybridity and diversity in food production practices and processes (Rosin & Campbell, 2009; Andrée, et al., 2010).

Finally, not all issues of social justice widely cited in the North American literature easily translate to the Australasian context. For example, whilst the poor treatment of agricultural workers has featured in critiques of both industrial agriculture and its alternatives in North America (e.g. Guthman, 2004), in New Zealand at least, this is not the case. The Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, which provides jobs to short term agricultural workers from Pacific island states such as Vanuatu, has avoided such problems by regulating minimum pay levels and working conditions (Hammond & Connell, 2009). These issues of translatability between North America and Australasia

are important to note. Any analysis of local food in New Zealand and Australia that draws on North American critiques should proceed mindfully.

The social justice and equity deficit of local food

Local food has many claimed ecological, economic and social benefits. On the social side claims have been made that shorter supply chains facilitate greater interaction between community members, producers and consumers, and link rural communities with urban neighbourhoods (Feenstra, 1997). This is beneficial because it leads to social cohesion between diverse populations, increases social capital (Gasteyer et al., 2008), and develops cooperation and respect between different rural and urban social groups, such as farmers and conservationists respectively (Berry, 2002).

However, whilst local food systems claim to create many benefits, their ability to provide solutions to the complex crisis facing the agri-industrial food system is questioned. In undertaking a critical analysis of local food systems in North America, several studies highlight a lack of social justice and equity considerations in both the delivery of local food systems in practice and in accounts of their emergent potential (e.g. Hinrichs, 2003; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Guthman, 2008; Allen, 2010; Slocum, 2010; Levkoe, 2011; Goodman et al., 2012).

This critique includes several key theoretical contributions, in attempting to define exactly what ‘social justice’ and ‘equity’ mean in the context of sustainable local food systems (Hinrichs & Allen, 2008; DuPuis et al., 2011). This contribution is particularly important, because it provides clarity to a scholarly field which at times uncritically equates local food systems as more just forms of food provisioning compared to agri-industrial systems (e.g. Kloppenburg et al., 1996; Hassanein, 2003). This equation occurs because many scholars and food activist writers, such as Hassanein (2003: 80), contend that local food systems provide participatory and democratic spaces that challenge

“the commodification of food and transforms people from passive consumers into active, educated citizens”. However, as DuPuis et al. (2011) argue, this does not intrinsically mean that the space of the local food system is just, especially when meanings of justice are rarely engaged with or referred to.

The central argument advanced by scholars who refute the claim that local food systems are socially just is underpinned by an understanding of local food systems as ‘place-based’ phenomena. Local food systems exist within social environments that have specific socio-historical and cultural contexts. Consequently, local food systems can never be neutral spaces, as they are places imbued with meaning, which makes them a ‘place’ (Vanclay, 2008; Hindmarsh, 2012). As Allen (2010: 301) argues, inequitable “social relationships of power and privilege [are] embedded within the place itself”. These social relationships influence material and cultural practices on both small and large scales, such as where, when, how and what food is produced and consumed, as well as for whom. Inequitable social relationships can exist between rural-urban communities (DuPuis et al., 2011), or indigenous-settler communities (Mares & Peña, 2011). They may divide people along race (Guthman, 2008), class or even gender lines (Allen & Sachs, 1993). Significantly, inequalities are not only counted in terms of a difference in material resources, but also a difference in status and access (Allen, 2010). It is these social relations that potentially reproduce exclusionary and unjust practices within the places that local food systems are embedded in, and the space of the local food system itself (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005).

Entrenching principles of social justice and equity into local food practice can go some way towards addressing the underlying causes of the limitations of both local food systems, and industrial agriculture (Allen & Sachs, 1993). A lack of attention to these principles can result in a myriad of difficulties, such as the codification of local food systems as ‘white spaces’ (or Pākehā spaces within a New Zealand context) (Guthman, 2008), which are dominated by a

select group of producers and consumers (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; De Lind, 2011). Consequently, people are excluded, including consumers who are marginalised in terms of ethnicity, age, physical ability, and wealth. Because of this exclusion, lack of democratic and participatory control over central aspects of the food system are reinforced, local or otherwise, such as natural resource allocation, cultivation practices, choice of production inputs, and the use of local and indigenous knowledges (Mares & Peña, 2011).

One example from the literature that illustrates how local food initiatives can reproduce wider exclusionary practices and structural inequality is Guthman's (2008) research, which surveyed and interviewed managers of farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives in California. Guthman demonstrates how the lack of participation by a variety of ethnic groups in the farmers markets and CSA projects was explained away by the managers as a lifestyle choice based on a lack of the 'right' values, or lack of education about the benefits of eating local food. It was assumed by the managers that when other people did not share the seemingly universal values, experiences or ideals of the largely white participants, "that those for whom they do not resonate must be educated to these ideals or forever marked as different" (Guthman, 2008: 391). This inscription of difference is problematic because it suggests local food participation is dependent on possessing the 'right' set of values, and reinforces existing social divides (e.g. class, ethnicity).

Whilst Guthman's (2008) research did not specifically identify why there was a lack of ethnic or cultural diversity amongst the local food initiative's participants, she points to a range of possible reasons. Localism initiatives often express white/Pākehā cultural histories of agricultural development and, therefore, exclude or deny the violent and exploitative colonial histories of indigenous people or people of colour; they do not always offer culturally appropriate food; or they employ the language or ideas of a privileged white, educated, and/or middle to upper-class majority, which do not always reflect the

experiences or worldviews of other social groups (see also Valiente-Neighbours, 2012).

Guthman's (2008) critique of local food, which highlights differences in social and cultural interpretations of 'good' or 'sustainable' food, as well as differences in privilege, has particular salience in New Zealand and Australia's postcolonial contexts. Race relations and the politics of indigeneity play out across postcolonial foodscapes in a multitude of complex ways, as Morris (2010) demonstrates in her analysis on the lack of Māori restaurants. The same assumption of cultural neutrality or universalism highlighted by Guthman (2008) is present in New Zealand's culinary foodscape. Culturally dominant, Pākehā eaters define what is and is not 'good' food, presenting Pākehā ideas of health and nutrition. Local food contexts are not immune to such dynamics of cultural privilege.

Moreover, with regard to Māori and Pākehā constructions of social sustainability, Scott, et al. (2000) argue that in the North Island "ethnicity cross-cuts or aligns with class to create deep, if often unrecognised, difference." These differences create stratified social groups, who often have divergent needs and aspirations. Scott, et al. (2000: 434) argue it is, therefore, essential to "examine the multitude of competing voices in a particular locality if 'sustainability' is to be about anything other than maintaining the status quo and entrenching current patterns of inequality." Here social justice and equity have a key role to play in reducing social inequality and increasing social interaction and self-determination. Procedural social justice, with its focus on participation, overcomes a lack of cultural recognition by enabling people to have a voice in decision-making processes (Schlosberg, 2004). The equitable expression of divergent needs and aspirations for a sustainable food system relies on collaborative, inclusive and diverse dialogues. Such dialogues allow for a plurality of worldviews and can lead to multiple co-constructed strong sustainability strategies.

Conclusion

Clearly, the pathway to a strong sustainable and just food system cannot be presented as a simple dichotomy between the current agri-industrial system and one that is more localised. Indeed, North American critiques of local food systems suggest they may be out of synch with an approach to strong sustainability that emphasises social justice and equity as key principles for transformational processes of social change. Instead, they may be acting as weak ‘categories of preservation’ by explicitly or implicitly reinforcing social and economic inequality. One of the reasons for this could be that local food systems are often outcome biased. That is to say, (re)localising the food system is often positioned as an end goal, with assumed inherent economic and ecological benefits that will counteract the sustainability challenges agri-industrial systems of food provisioning face (Born & Purcell, 2006). Contrary to being envisaged as a means, method or strategy to achieve a desired end (a sustainable and just food system), they are the end in themselves. ‘Local’, therefore, becomes conflated with ‘sustainable’.

However, if sustainability is as much about principles and processes as it is about achieving measurable goals, more consideration then needs to be given to whether or not local food systems embody these principles and processes, or help or hinder them. The framework for strong sustainability outlined earlier in this article provides some guidance as to how the sustainability of local food systems may be further explored, assessed and developed. For example, it is important that a sustainable food system promotes inclusive governance and decision-making processes to enable greater participation and representation of diverse groups in the co-construction of sustainability strategies. Principles of social justice and equity are key aspects of this as they can highlight barriers to participation. Earlier in this article I posed the question, what challenges are revealed when local food systems are analysed from a socially focussed

sustainability perspective? More research needs to be undertaken in New Zealand and Australia to answer this question fully, including exploring if North American critiques of local food are applicable in an Australasian context. However, it appears localisation is still very much contestable as a transformational pathway to a sustainable food future.

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