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The role of municipal markets in urban food strategies: a case study

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Abstract

Municipal markets have been recognised by both government and industry as valuable social spaces which can address growing public health issues in urban areas such as obesity. Yet, there is a lack of evidence linking markets to the public health impacts that are claimed. This paper will provide indicative levels of food access at a large municipal market in Leeds and extrapolate the findings into a discussion on the wider potential role of municipal markets in urban food strategies. Specific focus will be on the role on markets in addressing food access for low-income urban communities. As urban food strategies develop in towns and cities across Britain, steering groups and urban planners need to take a realistic look at potential existing food strategy assets. Historically, traditional British markets have been important municipal bodies that ensured urban dwellers have access to an adequate and affordable diet.

Key words: food access, food planning

#. Introduction

The recent developments of urban food strategies across the UK should be both celebrated and analysed. Their existence and development indicates a growing awareness of urban food issues from local government, however the potential impact of the various instruments within strategies need to be realistically considered. One such instrument that has been referred to in urban food strategies is the municipal market. Historically, traditional British markets have been important municipal bodies that ensured urban dwellers have access to an adequate and affordable diet (Schmeichen and Carls, 1999). In the UK municipal markets have been recognised by both government and industry as valuable social spaces that can address growing public health issues in urban areas such as obesity (The Cabinet Office, 2008). Yet, there is a lack of evidence linking markets to the public health impacts that are claimed due to a historic lack of research on markets (Zasada, 2009). As urban food strategies develop in towns and cities across Britain, food strategy steering groups need to take a realistic look at the current role of municipal markets in urban food systems.

Leeds Kirkgate Market and the Leeds Food Strategy 2006-2010 provide a framework for a case study that helps us investigate the area with more rigour. A common theme across food strategies is increasing access to healthy and affordable food to low income consumers. This paper will specifically focus on the role of markets in addressing food access for low-income urban communities. The discussion is framed by the following questions: what actions do municipal markets currently take to contribute to urban food strategies? What further actions could municipal markets take to contribute to urban food strategies and what forms of governance are necessary to ensure actions occur?

#. Context

Food strategies

Food strategies are elevating urban food issues to new levels of importance. Most major cities in the UK now have an urban food strategy (Food Vision, 2009). Pothukuchi and Kaufman (1999) suggests urban food issues should be viewed with the same magnitude as other urban issues such as transport and crime and that urban food strategies have the capacity to do this, by linking food systems to urban environments and local government structures.

Markets in the UK Today

Markets have existed in towns and cities across the UK for hundreds of years. In recent years there has been a from central government to utilize markets as policy vehicles for delivering wider agendas pertaining to food policy, thus suggesting that markets are valuable assets to urban food strategies (The Cabinet Office, 2008). Such agendas include social exclusion and public health. These issues have been strongly linked to food access (White et al., 2004; Wrigley et al., 2002; McEntee 2008). Statistics on the British market industry present a mixed picture. Currently the British market industry employs 96,000 people, has an average annual turnover of £125 million (Rhodes, chapter 6 2005). A lack of research in the area of food access and markets is making it challenging to accurately predict the potential impact that municipal markets could have on urban food strategies.

Food access

In the area of food access, there is a large literature. Wrigley *et al.*'s (2002) multi-method triangulation of food access research in an area of Leeds offers different insights into the social and cultural barriers preventing everyone from making healthy food choices. Wrigley et al.'s research is framed by studies across Britain investigating the relationship between food access and socio-economic status (White et al., 2004). McEntee (2008) suggests that food access and inequality constitute a threefold issue comprising access to knowledge of food and nutrition, economic access and physical access.

Leeds is in the north of England and has a population of 71,5404 (Office of National Statistics, 2010). Leeds has been the focus of in depth food access studies (Wrigley et al., 2002; Wrigley et al., 2004; Whelan et al., 2002). The studies recognise the range of food access issues that exist in Leeds to different groups living in low income settings as well as recognising the multifaceted nature of food access issues recognising that financial access, physical access and access to information need to be addressed simultaneously to have meaning impacts. The wider literature on food access further remarks that engaging consumers in the concept of changing behaviour to access a healthier diet is the most challenging aspect of addressing food access (McEntee, 2008; Dowler, 2008).

Leeds City Council's goal is to assist and encourage everyone in Leeds to have the opportunity to eat a healthy diet (Healthy Leeds Partnership, 2006). Leeds Food Matters – A Food Strategy for Leeds: 2006 – 2010 Healthy, Affordable, Safe and Sustainable food for all (Healthy Leeds Partnership, 2006) is an ambitious strategy to address myriad food issues in the city of Leeds and place them on the urban agenda. The plan sets out both the range of issues and goals to be achieved between 2006 and 2010. The strategy is currently being evaluated. Goals include increasing the amount of fruit and vegetables consumed by all residents of Leeds, increase accessibility to fresh produce and educate people about the importance of a healthy diet. The Leeds Food Strategy also provides a context to measure the policy approach taken by local government to address the issue of food access, public health and market retailers. The Leeds Food Strategy does not explicitly discuss a role for the city's

markets', however a market trader is quoted as saying: People always ask me if what they have bought makes up 5 portions of fruit and vegetables. It can be confusing but very popular with customers (Healthy Leeds Partnership, p.8 2006).

#. Methodology

We identified key barriers to food access from academic discourse (Dibsdall et al., 2002; McEntee, 2008; Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999; Whelan et al., 2002; White et al. 2004; Wrigley et al., 2002) and created food access indicator questions to gauge the level of food access at the market. Three areas of food access were identified: physical access, financial access and access to information about food and health issues. Within these three areas, questions were developed that would indicate the level of food access at the market. Indicatory data was collected through observations and document analysis in July 2009.

Case study

The case study indicates the level of accessibility to a healthy and affordable diet at Leeds Kirkgate Market and examines the market's role within the Leeds Food Strategy. The case study is based on Leeds Kirkgate Market, a traditional municipal market in the north of England. The market was a central point of early urban planning in Leeds and originally reflected historic market values, primarily: a duty of care and responsibility for the townspeople (Schmeichen and Carls, 1999).

Profile: Leeds Kirkgate Market

Footfall: Estimated footfall of 10,000 visitors per day (Swift, 2006)

Demographic of shoppers: Elderly, young mothers, low income from surrounding housing estates (Swift 2006)

Number of traders: 635 trading stalls including 434 permanent indoor stalls and 2001 temporary outdoor (open) stalls (Swift, 2006).

Opening times: Indoor trading Monday – Saturday 9am-5pm. Outdoor trading Monday – Saturday 9am -5pm with a half day on Wednesdays

Location: South East Central Leeds. Adjacent to City Bus Station (Metro 2009)

Governance : Leeds City Council Markets Division

##. Food access findings at Leeds Kirkgate Market

The data collected through observations at Leeds Kirkgate Market indicate that the role of the municipal market in urban food strategies is unclear. For many low income consumers, accessing healthy and affordable food at Leeds Kirkgate Market is made challenging by the high ratio of fast-food eateries to fresh-produce stalls (3:1), creating an obesogenic environment. There was little evidence of the market being explicitly involved with the Leeds Food strategy or its core principles and values. This raises questions of governance as both the food strategy and the market are under the purview of the local authority, but are clearly disconnected.

The single link to the Food Strategy was the existence of an All Being Well stall within Leeds Kirkgate Market. The main function of the All Being Well Stall was to be a 'health point' or drop in centre where shoppers at the market could receive information on health and cooking from a range of agencies. Different agencies host activities of their choice. When observations were undertaken, the Leeds Vegan Society was manning the stall providing vegan recipes to passersby. Although the All Being well stall exists to provide a public service and received funding from the Food Standards Agency, a local health charity and East Leeds PCT, within

the market it essentially operates as any other trader, paying rent with little voice in terms of market development.

The All Being Well stall presents a practical example of the lack of joined-up working to address food access across local government departments. Since the research was undertaken in July 2009, the All Being Well Stall has evolved into a Jamie's Ministry of Food¹. The new focus is on developing cooking skills in the shoppers at Leeds Kirkgate Market as well as continuing to offer a 'health point'. As the food projects pay full rent on their space, it appears that the market itself has not made any changes to engage with the strategy.

#. Discussion

Historically, municipal markets demonstrated a duty of care to vulnerable groups of people in urban settings. It is reasonable to expect that the output from any municipal institution should have the best interest of the local residents in mind. There is currently pressure on other municipal institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons to understand the risks of serving poor quality and unhealthy food. It is therefore worrying that a municipal market can have a ratio of 3:1 unhealthy eateries to fresh food stalls. A main challenge to accessing healthy and affordable food at LKM is the number of stalls selling cheap, unhealthy food essentially creating a local authority-endorsed obesogenic environment (Lake and Townsend, 2006). Lake and Townsend (2006) discuss the impact that disproportionate access to unhealthy food can have and how there is potential for positive impact in the design of urban public spaces to help to encourage healthier choices; "shaping the environment to better support healthful decisions has the potential to be a key aspect of obesity prevention intervention" (Lake and Townsend 2006). This presents a clear issue in looking to the market as a tool in a wider food strategy.

The placement of the All Being Well stall and now a Jamie Oliver's Ministry of Food outlet in Leeds Kirkgate Market reflects a growing trend in urban food policy development. This is the value of both voluntary and funded 'food projects' to effectively respond to structural failures of urban food systems (Dowler and Caraher 2003). The existence of these projects acknowledges that the local authority is aware of urban food issues; however it also underestimates the scale and complexity of the issues. Dowler et al. (2007) suggests that this is a typical response to issues of food access in that it is a minor intervention, avoiding any explicit up-stream intervention, and in practice maintaining a primarily volunteer-led community initiative. Thus externally it appears that Leeds Kirkgate Market actually is addressing the issue of food access, which has gained much attention from other local authority departments. However further examination in the case study revealed how in practice the All Being Well stall is not having the impact that it has the potential to achieve.

Further questions arise over who will use the new Ministry of Food outlet. Cooking sessions are £2 for participants on any form of social benefit and £4 for anyone else. The cooking sessions are 2 hours long; the goal is for customers to walk away with new skills and a healthy meal. The market are enthused by the Ministry of Food as there are hopes it will bring in new customers and help revitalise parts of the market increase the foot traffic which has been dwindling in recent years. However, the reason why the Ministry of Food exists is for the people already using the market – low income consumers. So what will happen if the Ministry of Food attracts new customers who are interested in learning new cooking skills but are not the people most at risk of diet related illness? Many urban food strategies focus on

¹ Jamie Oliver's Ministry of Food shops are drop-in centres aimed to teach people cooking skills. See <http://www.jamieoliver.com/jamies-ministry-of-food/>

developing new initiatives and projects to address issues that have occurred not because of a lack of food projects but because of larger structural and cultural issues such as the rise in fast-food culture, the dominance of the food industries and new technological developments that encourage minimal cooking. Food access literature stresses the value of integrated and joined-up responses to food access issues. It's clear that the Leeds Food Strategy reflects this; however responses must adjoin from both sides and do more than acknowledge a resource.

The reported clientele of the market are mainly from low income areas of Leeds (Swift 2006). One action that could have a potential food access impact would be the acceptance of Healthy Start Vouchers² at stalls that sell fresh produce or even the Ministry of Food. Healthy Start is a government food welfare scheme for eligible low income mothers and/or pregnant women to purchase fruits, vegetables, milk, infant formula and vitamins. Currently no stalls accept Healthy Start, however the market management is encouraging the market stall holders to accept Healthy Start vouchers. This cannot be enforced by the market management as each market stall owner is technically an independent business. This classification of market stalls being independent businesses presents a number of challenges to the market engaging with the Leeds Food Strategy. The stalls cannot be effectively regulated, as the council's role is first and foremost as a landlord and effectively providing a service to the traders. This raises questions regarding how food strategies can be effective. The food access literature is reflected in the Leeds Food strategy as it stresses the coordinated approach to increasing people's access to healthy food in Leeds. The action plan in the Leeds Food Strategy includes measures to promote the strategy to public and private sector groups including the retail sector.

There appears to be two opposing agendas; the market needs to ensure survival and thus increase the amount of foot traffic through it – the food strategy steering group want to use the market as a central location to engage people in healthier eating habits. The crux of the issue appears to be that the market management are not yet engaged with healthier eating agendas and the primary focus leans towards keeping the market in business and preserving the architectural heritage of the market. The area in which local authorities have invested is primarily in preserving the Edwardian architecture of the main market hall, which the case study illustrates is under-utilized. It is arguable that this type of investment is not primarily in the best interest of the public's needs. Lang, Caraher and Barling (2009) would ascertain that this indicates a weakness in the food system in which markets are an actor. This type of investment creates a tension between local authority departments, specifically as it neglects to address public health consumer benefits, disregarding the potential role of LKM in Leeds Food Matters (Healthy Leeds Partnership, 2006). This is an example of investing in the past, winning out over investing in the future. Tension stems from how markets are being defined and questions are being raised as to whether markets are a public service, a business or heritage sites that needs to be preserved. In general markets are aiming to reflect their communities, whether or not it is in the best interest of the consumer.

As the case study illustrates and the government reports recognize, markets do have the potential to respond to aspects of the needs of low income urban populations. However, doing this would mean taking a risk in terms of the economic value of a market. Rhode's survey estimated that markets in the UK are a £125million industry employing over 96,000 people (Rhodes, 2005). Shifting the role of markets from economic entities to service oriented entities would inevitably compromise trade bodies such as the National Association of British Market Authorities. The findings at Leeds Kirkgate Market found that for every trader

² See <http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/>

providing fruit and vegetables there were almost three fast food eateries. Given the current market situation, where the stall occupancy rate is 75% and falling (Rhodes, 2005), shifting the ratio of fast-food eateries to fruit and vegetable shops would essentially mean closing or replacing stalls and losing jobs. Thus trade bodies and market managers would be compromised. Not to mention, the other agendas markets are being encouraged to respond to such as tourism, environment and regeneration present further areas of tension. These tensions and pressures to effectively blend issues in a collective response present in essence a key challenge to food policy in general (Lang et al., 2009).

Markets are more complex than the mythic images we see of fresh and fruit and vegetables being sold. Markets are rife with politics and competition for both customers and space. Assumptions about what markets provide have been constructed throughout history. Images of fresh produce are often associated with provision of food from markets. Observations from the case study suggest how areas of Leeds Kirkgate Market are not immediately recognizable as a market due to the presence of retail chains that are more often associated with the high street, for example; Greggs the Baker, a national chain of bakeries and Jack Fulton a national chain of frozen food shop. Even the media corporation Sky had a stall where they were trying to sell TV and broadband packages to shoppers at Leeds Kirkgate Market. The market's competition is reflected in the many of the changes that have occurred in the last few decades. This perhaps explains the rise in commercial developments at markets such as Leeds Kirkgate Market which deconstruct the archetypal market image.

#. Implications

The case study highlights key areas of tension within food governance; on a local level the key tensions are between healthy and unhealthy foods being sold within markets, between the role of the local authority as both a landlord and as a health promoter and between the various functions of a municipal market i.e. is it primarily a public service, a business or a heritage site? Wider tensions are presented through the unfounded claims being made about the impact markets could have to enhance urban food systems and the statistics that show markets as dwindling in size and popularity. If the tensions explored in the case study are not addressed, then the potential for markets to be influential in food access will not be realised and their longevity will continue to be vulnerable as they exist precariously and undefined within urban food systems.

#. Recommendations

To address the aforementioned tensions, we recommend actions at both a local and national level. On a local level, recommendations include explicitly connecting the market and the food strategy through greater engagement with the wider goals and issues of the strategy. This could include connecting the food strategy directly to market traders to encourage healthier options to be sold. The case study does suggest that the number of fast food eateries needs to be regulated in a sensitive and constructive way, i.e. the market management support traders to change what they sell as opposed to shutting down trading stalls completely.

The mandatory acceptance of Healthy Start vouchers at all stalls that sell fresh fruits and vegetables would potentially have a large impact on providing food access to vulnerable groups and possibly drive the demand for more fruit and vegetable stalls to exist in the market.

On a national level further research needs to be commissioned to explore the range of markets operating in Britain today and the range of issues they face. This could inform the scale of impact that markets could have. Before linking markets to ambitious government agendas

such as food access, clear strategies for the survival of the market industry need to be clearly developed taking into account the range of markets and range of issues.

#. Conclusion

As Schmiechen and Carls (1999) describe, markets have been key in responding to the dietary needs of urban low income consumers throughout history. Today the picture is far more complex. It is not realistic to assume that markets can return to their original function and role in society as the sole provider of a healthy diet to the urban poor (Schmiechen and Carls, 1999). Although the basic need to provide urban low income consumers with healthy food still exists, the myriad of actors in the process of healthy food provision have become more complex. Outside factors have changed and providing food access is more multifaceted due to diverse populations, increased barriers to choice, the development of supermarkets, shifting priorities of the industry and tensions between policy actors at a local level.

The case study indicates that there is potential for the market to take a more active role in the Leeds Food Strategy, however the market management would need to fully engage with both the key principles of the strategy and the challenges the market is faced with. In theory many municipal markets do present a central point that food strategies could act through, however there are clearly some barriers that need to be crossed before this can happen.

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