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Effectiveness of Regional Alternative Food Systems on Food Inequality

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Effectiveness of Regional Alternative Food Systems on Food Inequality

Kirsten Rydzewski

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Abstract

Alternative food systems have become a popular response to conventional food systems, both agri-business and emergency food assistance charities. Common alternative food systems, like farmers markets, food co-ops, and community supported agriculture, are market-based strategies which emphasize environmental concerns. They are often dominated by white people who deem their emphasis on “local, healthy food” to be universal. While food justice issues are incorporated into some alternative food organizations, not all organizations seek input or engagement with the local BIPOC, Indigenous, and low-income people they serve. This study conducts an analysis of the efficacy of the growing food justice movement’s alternative food systems, and how incorporating these new systems into conventional regional food systems in mid-sized American cities can help alleviate food insecurity.

Four expert food activists in Grand Rapids, MI were interviewed for this paper. Four common themes were discovered: building an equitable local food system, food knowledge education, ending reliance on emergency food assistance, and encouraging urban farming. Local food activists see a need for alternative food systems, especially as a means to stop relying on emergency food assistance to provide adequate food to the community. Education on cooking and gardening, along promoting urban farming initiatives, were presented as ways to include community members in alternative food systems. To build a truly equitable local food system, community partnerships between rural farmers, farm workers, health organizations, schools, farmers markets, emergency food assistance programs, small businesses, faith organizations, homeowners, and consumers need to be constructed. The ways BIPOC communities view local food and farming through a racial justice lens of self-determination and self-sufficiency must be

respected by a white community which puts more emphasis on the environmental justice aspects of local food. The solution to making adequate, healthy food available to everyone requires large-scale systematic societal changes to fair labor practices, a minimum living wage, affordable housing, and a reliance on large corporations for food all of which impact low-income and communities the most.

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Introduction

In just the past decade, a strong movement to incorporate principles of social justice into food systems has expanded. Many of the alternative food systems popular today, from community supported agriculture to community gardens, originally developed as a reaction to the industrialization of food in the mid nineteenth century (Morales, 2011). This development occurred in response to the continual unequal distribution of food in the world. Despite the efforts of conventional food relief organizations like food pantries and soup kitchens, hunger and food insecurity continue to be a universal problem. This study conducts an analysis of the efficacy of the growing food justice movement's alternative food systems, and how incorporating these new systems into conventional regional food systems in mid-sized American cities can help alleviate food insecurity.

Modern day social movements are becoming more intersectional. As developed by Kimberlè Crenshaw 30 years ago, intersectionality is the theory multiple social categories, such as gender, race, and class, overlap in creating systems of discrimination and disenfranchisement (Smith, 2019). In the case of food insecurity, gender, sexuality, class and race contribute to instances of hunger. Environmental justice, racial justice, and feminism all influence food justice. Food justice is challenging structural inequalities and established institutions along with symptoms of food inequity, like food apartheid or "food mirages", where healthy food is present but economically unattainable to most of the residents, in some urban communities. Food apartheid within this paper is defined as the racially discriminative system which impacts access to food and who controls this access. The term food apartheid acknowledges the agency communities use to change their own access to food. This is becoming the alternative term to "food desert" which means a particular community lacks physical access to a full-service grocery store. The concept of food deserts simplifies food access as a transportation issue rather than a larger discussion of cultural relevance, community building, and self-sufficiency. Conventional food justice systems have focused on supplying food to those experiencing food insufficiency.

Grassroots food activists have moved beyond food insecurity to larger issues such as availability to kitchens and appliances for food preparation or culturally appropriate foods (Broad, 2016). Alternative food systems also seek to minimize the redundancy of food distribution efforts seen in traditional food relief organizations (Social Justice, 2012).

One of the most prevalent issues in food justice is the domination of food systems in general, and alternative food systems specifically, by European Americans. Farmers' markets and community supported agriculture (CSA) food shares are some of the alternative food outlets dominated by white people who bring their own framework to how these spaces should appear and operate (Guthman, 2011). The building of urban gardens, farmers' markets, and food co-op stores often signal an area of a city is undergoing gentrification with a predominantly middle-class white population moving in. This activity often leads to conflict between the established lower-class residents, who are often people of color, and the new urban farmers who believe they are doing "good" by creating healthy food options in areas that may have not had any previously (Romero, 2019). The well-meaning white people form their idea of what food justice is for the entire population without any input on racial and cultural differences from other members of the community (Broad, 2016). In some instances, the communities of color establish their own sovereignty over urban farms and food co-ops working for the betterment of their neighbors, regardless of race and class, but still framing their food justice work within their own histories and cultures (White, 2011a; Alkon, 2012). Whether framing alternative food justice work to address each individual ethnicity and class is more beneficial to overall success needs further research.

In addition to the dominance of white people over alternative food networks, the idea of what is "healthy" food and eating habits is based on the diets and foodways of European

colonizers. The diets of indigenous groups and African slaves tended to be vegetable based and seasonal. Many black and indigenous chefs and food writers, like Bryant Terry and Sean Sherman, are trying to dispel the myth traditional BIPOC diets are unhealthy and reinforce the idea the truly unhealthy aspects have come from a colonized diet. Additional research needs to be conducted into the white dominance of decision-making strategies concerning nutrition and food choices within alternative food systems.

Current food systems fuel a capitalistic system that flows from large scale producers to middlemen brokers to commercial stores. Communities are at the economic mercy of grocery store corporations who decide which cities and neighborhoods receive a grocery store location and what foods are stocked. These practices lead to working class neighborhoods and communities of color often left without any full-service grocery stores to provide fresh produce and meats. Residents of this food apartheid then are left with the options to buy their groceries from smaller outlets like gas stations, dollar stores, liquor stores, and bakeries near their homes, or travel to larger grocery stores. The most notable example of this occurred in Detroit, MI in the early 2000's as the last large grocery store in the metro area close (White, 2011a).

To combat the food system owned by agribusiness and big corporations, grassroots food organizations have turned to building their own regional and urban food commons to maintain control over the types of food they eat and profits. Food commons thinkers view food as an essential resource for all people, who should be guaranteed a minimum daily amount by governments, rather than as a commodity only obtained by those who can afford the price (Gaspard, 2020). New food commons emerge from individual efforts like farmers' markets, rural farms, community gardens, and social enterprise businesses coming together to build new structures through networking partnerships (Cummings, 2019; Broad, 2016). Loh and Agyeman

address the problematic issue of, even if farmers can work vacant urban land, the farm products often are sold at high end markets in order to make a profit leaving lower income residents without healthy, fresh food (2019). Issues of white privilege arise during attempts to build new commons. White residents new to certain areas of cities work to have the neighborhoods rezoned for urban farms because they see them as being beneficial to all (Romero, 2019), but neighborhoods with residents who are mostly people of color often reclaim vacant land as an act of resistance without government approval (White, 2011a; White, 2011b).

Similar in concept to the food commons, a main principle of food justice is the advocacy for equitable and sustainable food systems for all people regardless of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (Smith, 2019; White, 2011a). Environmental justice is incorporated into food justice by the advocacy for access to healthy foods and how they play into larger issues of public health (Alkon, 2012). Access to food is not merely the ability to readily purchase food, but also considers how land is utilized, who grows the food, who processes the food, how consumers access the food, and how leftover food is recycled or disposed (Loh, 2019). All too often altruistic middle class food activists impose their own ideas and cultural structures on what constitutes “healthy” food systems on people of color and lower economic classes. Structuring food justice in this way causes marginalized people to become uninterested and unimpressed in alternative food systems (Guthman, 2011). Better ways of engaging in food activism includes encouraging self-determination, facilitating new strategies in communities (Social Justice, 2012), and framing healthy food in terms of historical agricultural injustices to people of color (Alkon, 2012).

Alternative food practices often are framed as an opposition to corporate agriculture and food distribution (Smith, 2019). Rarely do they offer a direct challenge to capitalism and

neoliberalism. Food justice efforts focus on building small food systems that can sustain themselves as a collective against the entrenched food system (Loh, 2019). Regional food systems allow more people access to locally grown healthy foods and increases the economic sustainability of rural communities (Cummings, 2019) which are often left out of discussions of alternative food systems. Also left out of many discussions of food justice is the fight for a living wage which would allow more people to be able to afford locally grown, healthy, and, frequently, more expensive food.

Methodology

The data for this paper was collected through four Zoom interviews conducted from October 2021 to December 2021 with members of the local food system in Grand Rapids, MI. The questions for the interviews were open-ended and allowed for further discussion of topics important to the interviewee. The first interview was conducted on October 11, 2021, with Crystal Scott-Tunstall, professor at Grand Valley State University and member of the Urban Agriculture Committee. Questions for Professor Scott-Tunstall included:

- What do you see as components left out of the food system debate?
- Does general community building need to happen to encourage food system change?
- Do you see overlap in the different food justice programs?
- Could it be resolved by combining efforts?

The interview with Lisa Sission, retired professor at Grand Valley State University and executive director of Heartside Gleaning, was conducted on November 12, 2021. Questions for Professor Sisson included:

- What are the most pressing issues when it comes to the local food system?
- How do you see gleaning fitting into the local food system?
- What community building needs to happen in regard to the food system?
- What role should local governments have in changing the food system?

An interview was conducted with Emily Brink, Good Food Box Coordinator with Heartside Gleaning, on November 20, 2021. Questions for Ms. Brink included• How is the work of Heartside Gleaners funded?

- What is the environmental and sustainability impacts of the gleaning efforts?
- What local communities receive the food and how is it distributed?
- What other local organizations partner with Heartside Gleaners?

Interviews with Alita Kelly, co-founder of the Southeast Market in Grand Rapids, Michigan and member of the Urban Agriculture Committee, were conducted over several shorter discussions. Questions for Ms. Kelly included:

- What do you see as components left out of the food system debate?
- Does general community building need to happen to encourage food system change?
 - What are the most pressing issues when it comes to the local food system?

Results

Introduction

Four common themes emerged from the interviews with local food leaders. Most themes were general in nature emphasizing food systems already in place. The field of expertise for the interviewee did play a part in the responses as two are engaged in emergency food assistance and two are members of the Urban Agriculture Committee for the city of Grand Rapids.

Building Local Food Systems

A common theme found from the interviews is the need to build a local equitable food system. Local food systems allow community engagement and food choice factors often left out of national food distribution systems. A locally based food system also allows for a greater sense of food security for community members when emergency food sources are not required.

Purchasing as much food as possible from local and regional farms and businesses supports the local economy and creates job opportunities for entrepreneurs.

Local food systems also allow for the development of partnerships with other local organizations. Medical institutions, schools, small businesses, farmers markets, and emergency food assistance programs can coordinate efforts with farmers to optimize distribution, cutting down on food waste and ensuring culturally appropriate, nutritionally adequate food is delivered to different communities. A recurring issue is access to food in certain neighborhoods of the city and the affordability of nutritionally adequate food. Efforts to move dialogue away from the use of the term “food desert” to describe neighborhoods devoid of retail outlets for non-highly processed foods to “food apartheid” emphasizes the growing awareness of racial, health and economic inequality found in food systems.

Knowledge of Food

A general lack of knowledge of food and producing food plays a part in building alternative local food systems. Culturally relevant foods are needed in local food systems. Often the local climate prohibits the farming of these foods. People want to eat familiar foods whether introduced to them by their own families, communities, or regional traditions. When shopping with limited food budgets, people do not want to take a chance on unknown foods, at the same time people feel stuck in food ruts and would like to try new foods. According to one interviewee, community members also express interest in growing their own food, but this activity requires time and energy from people who may be working two or more low paying jobs along with caring for children or other family members.

Reliance on Emergency Food Assistance

The local food system relies heavily on nonprofits for emergency food assistance. The food justice movement emphasizes the need for adequate food for everyone as a basic human right (Morales, 2011). Without changes to wages, housing costs and other systemic economic factors, the guarantee of adequate food will continue to fall upon food assistance programs. Relying on the food available from food pantries, soup kitchens and take-home meals for school children takes away the dignity of choice from community members. Integrating social justice in food charities would prevent local food charities from becoming toxic to the communities they serve. Food distribution from charities operates as a stop gap measure in the larger food insecurity system. In order to break the reliance on emergency food assistance organizations for a basic human need, greater societal changes need to occur. An increase in the federal minimum wage, an increase in SNAP benefits, and voting for legislators who favor distributing monies to good food systems would change the landscape of the larger food system.

Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture is seen as a good alternative food choice in Grand Rapids. Community gardens and farms allow people to access food right in their own neighborhoods. Some reforms to laws allowing self-sustainability in the city have occurred in recent years, most notably regarding composting, greenhouse, and the raising of chickens. Limitations are still in place in the city for these activities though. Raising chickens requires approval of a resident's neighbors, a property over 3,800 square feet, and a permit fee amongst other requirements. Composting can only be done in a fully enclosed container in the backyard. Greenhouses are considered a backyard accessory structures which have to be made of durable materials and require a zoning permit. Additional changes are needed to encourage urban farming including access to land and creating an interest and willingness to farm.

Conclusion

Four common themes emerged amongst the interviewees, but individual points were brought up in some interviews. One interviewee said food activists should be focusing on striving to achieve the best possible access to food for the community rather than just settling for getting by with the minimal food available. Also, another point brought up was local food systems would be better served by trying to get activists to join food systems already in place rather than starting new organizations from scratch. Covid-19 forced many people in the food system, from local restaurants and food charities to the Department of Health and Human Services, to work together to get food for everyone quarantined or unemployed by the pandemic. Many food topics, land access, food justice, food sovereignty among others, were not directly brought by the interviewees even though their organizations deal with these issues.

Discussion and Conclusions

The interviewees for this paper expressed a need for alternative food systems in Grand Rapids, MI. A local food system would be built through partnerships and coalitions along with education for the general population on issues regarding gardening, nutrition, and cooking. Changes to local ordinances regarding small scale farming and gardening would help people economically with the cost of retail groceries. While not explicitly stated in the interviews, the push to allow more urban farming in Grand Rapids is a way to implement food justice in the local alternative food system, especially on the Southeast side of Grand Rapids which is predominantly African American and Latinx.

Alternative food systems do not implicitly include food justice principles. Alternative food system organizations, like farmers markets and food co-ops, are shifting toward incorporating social justice issues, at least within local Grand Rapids food activists. But, according to Alkon and Guthman (2017), the collective popular conception of alternative food systems still emphasizes the environmental and economic impacts devoid of direct challenges to the larger food system:

Alternative food activism maintains a grand vision for social change, one that imagines a safe and secure food system that can nurture healthy bodies, an environment in which biodiversity and a reverence for nature replace toxic chemicals, and a distribution of wealth away from corporate producers and distributors, shared among an array of small growers and entrepreneurs. However, as we and many others have written previously, this vision is limited, failing to see the needs and struggles of the low-income communities and communities of color, including farm and food workers, who are most harmed by the industrial food system. (p. 170)

The local food activists interviewed for this paper realize social justice ideas need to be incorporated into the alternative food systems in the city, although it may not be true for all members of the local food activism community. Many individual alternative food organizations want to prioritize their own missions and often operate autonomously from other local and regional food organizations failing to build coalitions, change policies, and alter political institutions (Alkon and Guthman, 2017).

The alternative food systems at the beginning of the twenty-first century often took a “color blind” approach to address the predominance of mainstream agri-business (Alkon and Guthman, 2017; Guthman, 2011; Smith, 2019). The culture of “whiteness” surrounding alternative food systems (Guthman, 2011; Romero and Harris, 2019) tends to emphasize market-driven strategies like increasing profits for small and medium scale farmers, who are predominantly white, and the environmental effects of farming (Smith, 2019), rather than access to food and land for people of color, women, and indigenous nations. This makes alternative food justice more appealing to middle class and white individuals (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Smith, 2019). “Whiteness” also holds an assumption of universalism “that values held primarily by whites are normal and widely shared” (Guthman, 2011) and if certain demographics do not hold these values, then they must be educated about the benefits of white values. One such concept is the idea of healthy, local food being a “lifestyle choice” not chosen by people of color (Guthman, 2011), not addressing why such foods being prohibitively expensive and unavailable due to systemic racism and classism.

Social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and Migrant Justices’ “Milk with Dignity” Program are draw attention to black and brown lives, and how food activism can improve their lives within the larger alternative food system (Alkon and Guthman, 2017), though

resources are still primarily available to white and well-known organizations. In Grand Rapids the efforts of Our Kitchen Table and the Southeast Market work to incorporate social justice in the local food system. Urban community gardens and farms started by affluent or white community members, often with well-intended motivations, present the activity as “cleaning up” neglected areas of a city (Romero and Harris, 2019) and introducing healthy food options to certain neighborhoods. Intrusive development like these does not take into consideration the needs and contributions of actual neighborhood residents. But if gardening and farming are presented to BIPOC and low-income residents as acts of resistance to the dominance to agribusiness and lack of food access, participation increases as the community sees its own food heritage and culture valued (Alkon, 2012; Ott, 2015; White, 2011a; White, 2011b). Growing their own food becomes an act of agency and empowerment as they do not need to rely on grocery stores and emergency food assistance (White, 2011b).

Even though alternative food systems promote locally raised and organic foods, this type of food system is still based on a market-based approach (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Alkon and Guthman, 2017) employed by corporate businesses. The phrases found in food activism like “vote with your fork” and “look your farmer in eye” when shopping at farmers markets promote purchasing food rather than growing food at home. A neoliberal approach to food systems means access to food, farming, and food related businesses keeps low-income people from being able to participate (Alkon, 2014; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011; Alkon and Guthman, 2017). Some of the changes to the ordinances in Grand Rapids to allow urban farming require the payment of permit fees to keep chickens or zoning fees to build a greenhouse. Market-based approaches to local food systems do not improve labor practices or wages for farm, restaurant, and retail food workers as profits for the owners are the primary concern (Alkon, 2014).

People interviewed for this paper emphasized how a local food system needs to be created, but certain populations were not included in the discussions. No mention was made of small farmers in the surrounding rural areas beyond receiving produce from them for markets and how a local food system would benefit them. Rural residents tend to be more conservative than people who live in urban centers, but rural communities are no less concerned with local food systems and social justice issues, albeit for different reasons (Davey, 2018). Incorporating food justice intersectionality would also mean questioning how “eating local” occurs on land taken from indigenous nations and remade with the cultural standards of the colonizers (Mares, 2011). The original local foodways are completely different from the ones brought by the colonizers and the enslaved they brought with them.

In sum, food movements, including alternative food systems, do not always develop to incorporate food justice ideas. Conventional alternative food institutions like farmers markets and community supported farms still rely on a market system where the participants need money in order to obtain food. Food access revolves around food as a nutritional commodity (Mares, 2011) not taking into account its cultural and social importance in a community. To build a truly equitable local food system, community partnerships between rural farmers, farm workers, health organizations, schools, farmers markets, emergency food assistance programs, small businesses, faith organizations, homeowners, and consumers need to be constructed. The ways BIPOC communities view local food and farming through a racial justice lens of self-determination and self-sufficiency must be respected by a white community which puts more emphasis on the environmental justice and economic aspects of local food. While urban farming was looked upon as a viable alternative for people to access food, other solutions could include the creation of land trusts for urban gardens, community gardening for those people who do not have large

enough properties for gardens, and food co-ops to sell home-based food products and produce. Education on basic growing and cooking techniques is also needed. Ultimately the solution to making adequate, healthy food available to everyone requires large-scale systematic societal changes to fair labor practices, a minimum living wage, affordable housing, and reliance on large food corporations for food all of which impact low-income and communities the most.

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