NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

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Cover design by Anna Gatti

24. Sustainable Foodscapes: Hybrid Food Networks Creating Food Change

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Food matters, from modes of production to global supply chains, what we eat and how we address food waste. Food practices shape not only climate and ecological breakdown but also human health and well-being including within our food producing communities, unequal access to food, food justice, animal welfare and more. Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use (AFOLU) activities account for 21–37% of total net anthropogenic GHG emissions (IPCC 2019). Considering these 'wicked issues' in the UK, and how to work for more sustainable food systems, centres debates on intersecting issues of land use, food distribution, community-based innovation and social justice amongst others. Within the present food policy vacuum in England, place-based community groups have been self-organising and connecting with different national organisations whose campaigns overlap to form hybrid food networks. Hybrid food networks focus on central food issues, such as sustainable local food supply chains, access to sustainable local food, household food insecurity and more. These networks intersect at a place-based scale where locally acting communities take forward programmes of work to enact sustainable food change, whilst also linking to the campaigns of national and translocal networks and frameworks. This essay will explore the dynamic potential of these hybrid networks in working towards place-based sustainable food solutions, via a case study of Devon.

Introduction

Food has become an organising principle through which we measure the impacts of crises on our lives in a time of multiple emergencies. From issues of effective food supply chains and access to food during the UK COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, to contestations around how to eat for a sustainable planet. Food, how it is produced, and how we get access to it as consumers, is of central concern when considering a time of multiple emergencies. Action to address these critical issues has been seen at a place-based scale, from climate assemblies and juries[1] to local civil society food organisations collaborating to effect food change, including forging partnerships with local authorities to support place-based food assistance programmes.[2]

Local food initiatives are now collaborating at a range of scales across the UK, from city level, to borough or countywide projects, as exemplified by The Sustainable Food Places, Food Power Alliances and Feeding Britain projects. Intersecting actions of civil society organisations via hybrid food networks act as an increasingly important mechanism to link food actors, community-based organisations and policymakers in addressing the critical food issues faced by communities in the UK today. Civil society food organisations are concerned with issues of boosting sustainable food production, household food insecurity, access to fresh food, diet-related ill-health, promoting sustainable diets, boosting community food resilience, and more (Blake 2019; Sandover 2020a) (also see Halme et al., this volume). Self-organising local food initiatives connect place-based organisations with nationwide bodies to form hybrid networks working for food change, linking grassroots community organisations with policymakers (Moragues-Faus and Sonnino 2019; Santo and Moragues-Faus 2019). By being comprised of actors representing a range of community groups, hybrid food networks are able to generate community-based knowledge and work to effect policy change (Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015; Sonnino et

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1   Recent and current examples here include Leeds Climate Change Citizens' Jury, Adur and Worthing Climate Assembly, Kendal Climate Jury, Devon Net Zero Citizens' Assembly and others.

2   See the work of Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, La Via Campesina, EAT Nordic Cities Initiative, African Food Security Urban Network for examples of trans-local and regional food policy organisations.

al. 2016; Sandover 2020a). At a wider scale, place-based food networks are common features of a number of countries' food policy landscapes, including USA and Canada, and they often intersect with trans-local food networks, enabling international knowledge sharing and target setting for place-based sustainable food action (Santo and Moragues-Faus 2019).

This essay explores how food traverses debates focused on taking action on climate change, specifically issues of governance and the role of civil society organisations in shaping sustainability agendas. In particular, it focuses on hybrid food networks and the dynamic potential of these hybrid networks in working towards place-based sustainable food solutions that also consider imperatives of food justice.

Hybrid Food Networks

City-regions, and other local administrative areas, have been recognised as being ideally placed to promote localised food strategies and to join up the disparate actors working towards similar ends (Morgan 2013). Recent scholarship has focused on the development of effective food governance frameworks in the cities of London, Toronto and New York, city-regions of Bristol, Brighton and Hove, Glasgow, and trans-local frameworks such as The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and the C40 Cities network, who work for more just and sustainable policies (Morgan and Sonnino 2010; Sonnino et al. 2016; Santo and Moragues-Faus 2019). A more integrative approach to food policy thinking is being progressed via city-based and place-based initiatives that enable policymakers to work with civil society actors and trans-local networks on common issues (Betsill and Bulkeley 2007; Morgan and Sonnino 2010). Place-based and trans-local networks of civil society food actors are emerging as coherent voices for a reconfigured food system (Sonnino et al. 2016; Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015; Santo and Moragues-Faus 2019).

Hybrid food networks focus on central food issues such as sustainable local food supply chains, access to sustainable local food, household food insecurity and more. Many food-focused activist and campaigning networks such as Sustainable Food Places (SFP), Landworkers' Alliance, Food Power, La Via Campesina, and others

intersect at a place-based scale where locally acting self-organising communities take forward programmes of work to enact local food change, whilst also linking to the campaigns of national and translocal networks and frameworks. National UK networks, like SFP and Food Power, assist place-based civil society organisations' action for food change by offering support, limited funding and sharing tools such as evidence-based reports (Sonnino et al. 2016; Santo and Moragues-Faus 2019). In the UK, SFP have been working since 2013 with localised food partnerships to work towards transforming food cultures and food systems. The network has grown from the first six cities in 2015 to the over fifty-five places that are working today towards common goals of implementing and supporting sustainable and fair food systems that meet the needs of local communities (Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015). SFP has the potential to promote access to sustainable and healthy food by influencing policy makers, local communities and local businesses. There are examples of enduring and impactful work by local food networks across the UK, which in England have partly arisen in response to the policy vacuum, although there is hope that this will change via the work of the National Food Strategy (2020), plus progressive food policy action in the devolved nations.[3] Examples include Bristol Food Network, Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, Manchester Food Board, Sheffood, Food Durham, Food Cardiff, Glasgow Food Policy Partnership and others

In recent years, Sustainable Food Places have also linked to other national movements for food change. In particular, the Food Power and Feeding Britain movements have connected with sustainable food cities, and independent self-organising communities to work together on the rising issue of UK household food insecurity. These networks share commonalities of objectives but have differences in terms of their wider aims and ambitions. By working together on specific objectives and in the absence of effective government policies in England, these organisations are creating hybrid food networks that address complex concerns that require a multi-partnership, multi-issue response.

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3   See https://www.nourishscotland.org/ and https://www.foodsensewales.org.uk/ for insights into different political approaches within the UK.

Action on Food at a Place-Based Scale: Food Exeter

The formation and operation of hybrid food networks are visible in the recent history of Food Exeter, which was established as a sustainable food city in 2014 (previously known as Exeter Food Network) to work towards sustainable and healthy food for all in the city. In 2018 Food Exeter also became a 'Food Poverty Alliance' after securing funding from Food Power and began a dialogue process to explore a cross-city approach to addressing household food insecurity. In a time of COVID-19, Food Power funding enabled Food Exeter to begin working with emergency food providers, on their 'Signposting Project' to begin first steps in exploring ways of reducing disjointed operations across the city. Food Power funding has also assisted Food Exeter work with other regional organisations working to address household food insecurity. The South West Food Power Alliance supports the sharing of best practices and exploring common experienced challenges for organisations working on access to food and food equity across the region.

Local governance structures in Devon have shaped Food Exeter's independence as a civil society organisation working without formal links to local authorities. In the county of Devon, public health responsibilities around food and health sit with the county council, reducing pathways to engagement with Exeter City Council. However, the COVID-19 crisis and mass climate emergency protests in 2019 have impacted the urgency with which food issues are now perceived by local authorities, with both Devon County Council and Exeter City Council taking steps forward in establishing food strategies or food partnerships in late 2020 and early 2021. Cascading government funding on food support, Devon County Council have funded organisations at each district council level to run short programmes to join up emergency food providers and trial programmes in order to prevent household food insecurity. In Exeter, Food Exeter are working with Exeter Community Initiatives to run this programme in collaboration with emergency food providers and agencies.

Devon County Council also supports a multi-stakeholder partnership, Devon Climate Emergency, to run a Carbon Plan process in the wake of all councils in Devon declaring a climate emergency in 2019. The Carbon Plan process is a multi-faceted approach with the Devon

Climate Emergency Response Group, made up of all local authorities in Devon plus other key environmental, land-use and business membership groups, managing the process. Alongside them, The Devon Climate Emergency Taskforce operates as an independent group of experts weighing up the evidence sourced from expert hearings and public consultations. Between them they have agreed an Interim Devon Carbon Plan, with key controversial issues, such as sustainable food production and consumption issues being deliberated by a Climate Assembly in summer 2021.

Alongside their focus on access to food and household food insecurity, Food Exeter are focused on action to build capacity for sustainable food in the city. In 2020, Food Exeter supported the establishment of a new community benefit enterprise, Good Food Exeter, to set up neighbourhood farmers' markets in communities where good-quality, fresh produce was less available. With the uncertainties of lockdown and with the support of 'Veg Cities' funding from The Sustainable Places, Food Exeter decided to turn this into an online farmers' market where customers made online orders based on what produce was available and then collected from a designated collection point on a set day or received their delivery by e-cargo bike. With forty (and growing) Greater Exeter local and micro-producers supplying them with affordable, high quality produce, the market has won loyal support from local customers. A difference between Good Food Exeter and other online food suppliers is that Good Food Exeter's producers include micro-producer startups who may have a limited weekly stock. This enables micro-producers to sell as little or as much as they can and so support their first steps as a sustainable food producer.

The Networks Powering Local Food Initiatives

COVID-19 has shown that local food producers, distributors and shops have proved to be "small and nimble and people-powered" (Tom Steele of the Kentish Town Box Scheme), highlighting that their ability to provide access to food relies on their adaptability and their community embeddedness. Independent, local food shops source produce from a diverse range of suppliers including wholesalers, local producers and

micro-producers. Food initiatives enact community embeddedness that forge strong relationships both with their suppliers and with their customers. An innovative local food market, Good Food Exeter draws on the enduring relationships of their sister organisation, Food Exeter with the UK-wide Sustainable Places network, who host a range of channels for sharing best practices and learning from other place-based food policy organisations. Enduring relationships with local food producers, shops, charities and community centres in Exeter also created the local knowledge networks needed for Good Food Exeter to be formed. The networks underpinning the responsiveness and adaptability of the local food economy may be place-based and contingent, however sustainable food networks, producer membership organisations and associated charities enable the building of capacity within the local food economy. This in turn builds the potential to invigorate food security at regional and local scales via relocalised supply chains. Local food initiatives have proven themselves to be innovative, adaptable and creative in a time of crisis. However, a longer-term flourishing of the local food economy will require more than the dedication and ingenuity of local food leaders.

In her new book, *Sitopia*, Carolyn Steel (2020) calls for a redesigning of the local food market in collaboration with local authorities, who have the ability to support the local food economy via policy and planning. Multi-purpose covered markets, rate reductions for local food shops, supporting pop-up micro food businesses, exploring access to land for new entrants, and more, would enable the visibility of local food producers within our high streets. By providing access to popular shopping spaces, policies that support local food producers would also have the potential to boost the vibrancy of these spaces, in line with thinking on the experience economy (Poulsson and Kale 2004). A decentralised approach to food policy and redesigning local food retail spaces needs to go hand-in-hand with national policies that support this sector. The COVID-19 crisis shows that an over-reliance on supermarkets for the nation's food needs has created fragile agri-food supply chains that are not only vulnerable to disruption but also hamper the placing of local, sustainable and regional fresh produce at the heart of our communities (Sandover 2020b).

Conclusion

In 2019/2020 national and local authorities made declarations of a climate emergency and as outlined here at a regional level, Devon is taking steps to address the role of food in the climate change emergency. Alongside this, the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated action to address household food insecurity and promote sustainable food supply chains. Drawing on its history of work funded by SFP and Food Power, Food Exeter found itself at the centre of this place-based action for sustainable and equitable food change. National linkages provided Food Exeter with essential opportunities to learn from other place-based food networks. Local linkages and its history of operation enabled it to move swiftly to innovate new programme areas of work, such as the new emergency food project and the establishment of Good Food Exeter.

Taking a civic-led and bottom-up approach, local and regional food and health programmes can bring together networks of organisations to work collaboratively on pressing food issues within their localities. Working with local authorities, key decision-makers and regional bodies, hybrid food networks support place-based food networks to realise the goal of transforming local and regional food systems whilst working to address climate change. Developing a regional, sustainable food plan would support these hybrid food networks to build capacity in the supply and sale of local, sustainable food, including increasing the procurement of local, sustainable food by public bodies and anchor institutions.

Spatially, these models increasingly act as nested partnerships, where place-based networks engage with partners within regional and national frameworks based on agreed aims and objectives. Through these actions of network formation and co-producing knowledges, hybrid food networks can influence and implement locally adapted programmes and policies that enact sustainable food change.

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