

RESEARCH COMMENTARIES: FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH PRIORITIES OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS

Food sovereignty and agricultural land use planning: The need to integrate public priorities across jurisdictions

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Abstract

Recent calls for national food policies that promote greater food sovereignty represent an emerging concern of public policy. Such a shift in food policy toward greater citizen control over domestic

food supplies would have significant implications for all aspects of the agri-food system. One area of concern is the conservation and use of agricultural land because, in the end, every act of producing and consuming food has direct or indirect impacts on the land base. Yet no research has considered the potential interactions and implications between food sovereignty and agricultural land use planning.

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This gap in research presents an opportunity to critically examine the effects of the changing roles and values on agricultural land use planning within and across jurisdictions. We believe that a better understanding of the dominant policy regimes within the agri-food system, including global competitiveness, farmland preservation, and food sovereignty, can lead to land use planning practices that are most beneficial for integrating not only multiple interests across jurisdictions, but also multiple perspectives.

Keywords

agricultural land use planning, farmland conservation, food sovereignty, global competitiveness, planning theory, policy regime analysis

The purpose of this commentary is to focus on the need for researchers to critically examine how the changing role and value of food and agriculture, as reflected in recent calls for national food policies that promote greater food sovereignty, affect agricultural land use planning within and across jurisdictions. While the commentary focuses on Canada, the aim is to discuss land use policy and legislative issues that are relevant, to greater or lesser degrees, throughout North America.

The recent emergence of food sovereignty as a subject of national policy reflects growing public concerns about the security and safety of the domestic food supply. It also reflects concerns about the right of peoples to define, protect, and regulate domestic agricultural production and land policies that promote safe, healthy, and ecologically sustainable food production that is culturally appropriate (International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, 2002). In Canada there have been several recent calls for citizens to have greater control over national agri-food policies (Qualman, 2011; Wiebe & Wipf, 2011; Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010, 2011). The National Farmers Union (NFU, 2010), Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA, 2010) and Food Secure Canada (2011) are some of the national actors calling for changes. The NFU, for example, argues that, “Farmer autonomy and control are fast eroding. As farmers

lose that control, they lose the ability to make effective long-term plans. And Canadians lose sovereignty over their territory and their food systems” (NFU, 2010, p. 22). Adopting policies that promote greater food sovereignty could easily reach into people’s daily lives, with economic, social, and environmental implications. Such a shift in food policy would also have significant implications for the conservation and use of agricultural land because, in the end, every act of producing and consuming food has direct or indirect impacts on the land base. Yet no research has considered the potential interactions and implications between food sovereignty and agricultural land use planning.

One approach to examining this relationship is to combine the theoretical frameworks of policy regime analysis and planning. To understand how policy regimes change or reinforce the status quo, Jochim and May (2010) argue that the formation and change of policy regimes can be examined by focusing on four key domains: issues, ideas, interests, and institutions. With this approach one can evaluate the emergence, strength, and durability of a policy regime in conjunction with a thorough analysis of relevant strategy documents and debates to assess the uptake of ideas, levels of support, and capacity to coordinate governing institutions to structure authority, attention, and information flows. For example, the recent calls for change to national agri-food policies have the potential to shape institutional development and to mobilize concerned interests not only across policy boundaries (horizontal) but also across jurisdictions, from national to local (vertical). Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl (2009, p. 2) state that we must look to the policy actors to determine the content and process of public policy-making, and also explore the structures and institutions that serve to constrain and influence those actors’ efforts. In his study of farm and food policy in Canada, Forbes (1985) notes the need to infer specific inputs by observing outcomes because of the secret or not publicly reported details of policy-making decisions.

Food sovereignty is an example of what Jochim and May (2010) describe as a “messy policy problem” (p. 304). Jochim and May are referring to boundary-spanning policy regimes “that foster integrative actions across elements of multiple sub-

systems,” and in so doing create greater challenges for formulating policy and for governing once policies are devised. What makes an examination of food sovereignty as a policy even messier is its interactions with and implications for other long-standing policy regimes such as global competitiveness and farmland conservation.

A policy regime of global competitiveness has strengthened over the past 40 years at both the national and provincial levels (Ash & Brink, 1994; Barichello, 1995; Bryant, 2012; Dakers, 1996; Miner, 1994). Dakers and Forge (2000) describe this policy objective as ensuring the “industry’s viability in a context of freer trade” (Evolving Departmental Structure section, para. 1). Several other authors (Ash & Brink, 1994; Miner, 1994; Wilson, 1990) describe a similar trend while highlighting strategies to successfully integrate the domestic agricultural sector into the global economy. A recent report on competitiveness by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food (2010) focused on access to new markets, barriers to trade, food safety, product labeling, and market concentration within sectors. Input to this report was provided by national and regional commodity trade associations, meat and other food processors, transportation associations, and policy institutes, among others. Although the membership of the agri-food policy community in Canada is strong individually, the community is nationally fragmented and organizationally divided, as national policies do not always serve all members or geographic regions equally (Skogstad, 1990). For example, export-oriented policies may promote the export of raw food products at the risk of higher prices for domestic food processors. Such policies also have regional differences, where policies may benefit one region (food processing in central Canada) to the disadvantage of food producers in another region (food producers in the prairies). Notwithstanding these internal challenges, the competitiveness policy regime continues to strengthen, as evident in the Growing Forward 2 policy framework announced on September 14, 2012 (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada [AAFC], 2012).

Conserving farmland first garnered serious public attention in the early 1970s with most

provincial and local jurisdictions having some form of legislation or guidelines in place by the end of the 1970s (Beesley & Ramsey, 2009; Bunce, 1998; Furuseth & Pierce, 1982a, 1982b). Caldwell, Hilts, & Wilton (2007a) provide a comprehensive account of farmland conservation policies in and across Canada (see also Bray, 1980; Caldwell, 1995; Caldwell & Dodds-Weir, 2009; Johnston & Smit, 1985). Their text reviews the historical development of farmland policies in Québec (Bryant & Granjon, 2007; also Bryant, 2011; Bryant, Singh, & André, 2007), Ontario (Caldwell, Hilts, & Wilton, 2007b; see also Caldwell & Hilts, 2005; Gayler, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2010), and British Columbia (Smith, 2007; also Smith, 1998). These policies were accompanied by an “array of economic, environmental, and social conflicts [which] characterize the tension between urban, recreational, infrastructure, and industrial land uses, and viable rural or agricultural communities” (Hiley, 2007, p. 163). Correspondingly, motivations for conserving farmland are influenced by factors such as food production, market value for land, environmental issues, amenity of rural landscapes, agrarian ideals, and land use conflicts on the urban fringe (Wilton, 2007). In spite of efforts over the past 40 years, Canada has experienced a continual loss of prime farmland across the country. Hoffman (2001) observed, for example, that since 1971 urban activities have been responsible for the conversion of 12,000 sq. km. (4,633 sq. miles) of farmland, one-half of which was classified as prime agricultural land under the Canada Land Inventory. The issue is especially acute in Ontario, which contains the country’s largest supply of prime agricultural lands (Simpson-Lewis, Moore, Pocock, Taylor, & Swan, 1979), but has been documented elsewhere, including Alberta (Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Resource Planning Group, 2002) and British Columbia (Cavendish-Palmer, 2008).

At some point the mixed messages and cross-implications of agri-food policy regimes must be reconciled through how we choose to use our finite land base. The core concern of planning in the public domain, according to Friedmann (2003; also Allmendinger, 2009), is how knowledge should be properly linked to action and specifically, as

Connell (2009, 2010) explains, to society's need to actively construct a desirable future. The function of land use planning is to make future public and private interests in the types, amounts, and spatial arrangements of desired land uses a visible part of present decision-making processes (Connell, 2009), and must consider the public's interests in environmental quality, land conservation, health, economic efficiency, social equity, heritage, infrastructure, transportation, and affordability, to name a few (Leung, 2003). The desired outcome of the planning process is to identify and reconcile the relevant interests that often compete with each other for access to and use of the same land base.

Across North America, the historical decline in the economic and social role of agriculture has been accompanied by a significant reduction in and degradation of the prime agricultural land base. This land base faces growing pressures from urban development and the pursuit of other economic priorities, with few indications that this trend will be significantly curtailed (e.g., Benjamin, 2011). As well, the rights and capacities of farmers to use agricultural lands are increasingly compromised by neighboring nonfarm uses, such as when residential neighbors file unwarranted nuisance complaints about farm odors and noise, or sever (subdivide) residential building lots near agricultural operations (Caldwell, Churchyard, Dodds-Weir, Eckert, & Procter, 2011). Consequently, the nationally significant yet localized nature of agricultural land use issues points to the need for coordination among multiple jurisdictions. The issues, however, are complicated as difficulties of cohabitation are not just related to scale (the proximity of farm and nonfarm uses) but can also be related to differences in cultural values and also to how land and activities (farm and nonfarm) are managed. Land protection alone is not adequate over the long term; better management processes are needed to complement land use planning *per se*. This means being able to accompany farmers in the development of their activities (by counseling, providing useful information, and facilitating) and helping nonfarm people integrate better into the rural community.

Reconciling competing interests for agricultural lands remains a complicated process that

crosses multiple jurisdictions. Under Canada's Constitution Act, the federal and provincial governments share responsibility for agriculture. Local interest is the result of the provinces delegating certain areas of decision-making to the local level, with varying degrees of provincial oversight. (This makes Canada's legislative framework different from the home rule of the United States.) Domestic agricultural policy is also highly influenced by international relations and agricultural policies (e.g., Agriculture Agreement as part of the World Trade Organization's Uruguay Round), as most countries function in an increasingly globalized economy (Skogstad, 1990, 2012; Wilson 1990). This point is well illustrated by the attention Canada's supply-managed sectors have attracted in various trade discussions (e.g., NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership). Similar debates have taken place in the European Union, leading to policies based on "multifunctionality," in which economic, environmental, and social goals beyond the production of food and fiber are embedded in agri-food policy, as reflected in recent reforms to Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (Skogstad, 2012; also Moyer & Josling, 2002; Ritson & Harvey, 1997; see Blay-Palmer (2012) for a discussion of adopting multifunctional policy in Canada).

The agri-food policy regimes of global competitiveness and farmland preservation will continue to be influenced profoundly by development and adaptation to shifting domestic and global drivers, including market volatility, urbanization, climatic disruptions to global food supplies, and growing demand for local food and farmland amenities. The addition of food sovereignty to the mix complicates the situation by introducing new voices with greater potential for conflicting interests over land uses, all of which add to the changing role and value of food and agriculture in North American society. From a research perspective, we believe there are three critical areas that can be pursued to examine critically the effects of these changing roles and values on agricultural land use planning within and across jurisdictions.

Research objective: Document and analyze the dominant policy regimes within the agriculture and agri-food system, including global competitiveness, farmland preservation, and food sovereignty. Related objectives are:

- (a) To understand the structure and dynamics of the agri-food policy system, including issues, ideas, interests, and institutions of each agricultural policy regime; emergence, strength, and compatibility of agricultural policy regimes; and ideologies, issues, and intentions of key stakeholders;
- (b) To document each agricultural policy regime at national, provincial/state, and local levels, including guidelines, programs, plans, and strategies; and
- (c) To assess the potential impacts of implementing a food sovereignty regime on farmland conservation and the rights to farm.

Research objective: Undertake studies of agricultural land use planning processes at the level of local governments in different regions.

The studies could be guided by three research questions:

- (a) To what extent do existing agricultural land use plans, which are generally integrated into or part of broader land use plans, accommodate the dominant policy regimes?
- (b) To what extent do existing agricultural land use plans integrate policy across all levels of government?
- (c) What practices are most beneficial among these agricultural land use plans, strategies, and policies, including proactive management processes? For example, how have they integrated not only policy across jurisdictions but also multiple perspectives such as those of citizens, local organizations, professional organizations representing farmers, and environmental groups?

Research objective: Mobilize and apply the knowledge generated by researchers to help formulate more integrated agricultural land

use planning solutions in rural, peri-urban, and urban areas.

- (a) Provide an evidence-based perspective on public policy for agriculture and food;
- (b) Host regional workshops focused on integrated solutions to agricultural land-use planning; and
- (c) Host a forum of national stakeholders focused on formulating policy recommendations for agricultural land use planning.

We believe that pursuing these questions can contribute to three scholarly foundations of food systems research and community development: agricultural planning and farmland conservation; food sovereignty, food security, and local food movements; and policy studies. Overall, although the relevant literature provides a comprehensive foundation for the study of agricultural land use planning, food sovereignty represents a nascent policy regime that could have profound impacts on domestic agricultural policies across all levels of jurisdiction. Through the objectives we have identified, researchers can help provide an evidence-based perspective to the current public debate and clearly delineate food sovereignty considerations from the perspective of global competitiveness and farmland conservation. The extent to which current debates may or may not alter the trajectory of domestic policies will be of benefit to land use decision makers, planning practitioners and policy-makers at all levels of government, to nongovernmental organizations, industry groups, farmer organizations, farmers, and the general public, as well as to other jurisdictions around the world dealing with similar agri-food issues.

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