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

Future food system research priorities: A sustainable food systems perspective from Ontario, Canada

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Submitted August 2, 2013 / Revised September 19, 2013 / Published online September 24, 2013

Citation: Blay-Palmer, A. D., Knezevic, I., Andree, P., Ballamingie, P., Landman, K. E., Mount, P. A., Nelson, C. H., Nelson, E., Stahlbrand, L. M., Stroink, M. L., & Skinner, K. (2013). Future food system research priorities: A sustainable food systems perspective from Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 3(4), 227–234. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2013.034.029>

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Abstract

Given the range and complexity of pressures on food systems across the globe, we suggest that future research on sustainable food systems can be clustered under three broad topics: the need for integration across multiple jurisdictions, sectors,

and disciplines that includes different models of food systems and community visions of an integrated food system; the need for focus on tensions and compromises related to increased numbers and reach of sustainable food systems by scaling out and up; and the need for appropriate governance structures and institutions. Comparative research that works directly with community-based organizations to co-create and apply shared

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research tools and then engage in common assessment projects offers ways to develop more connected scholarship. More extensive work using concept maps, participatory action research, life-cycle analysis, and urban/rural metabolic flows may help to develop, animate, and answer future research questions in more integrated ways, and will build on opportunities emerging from more inclusive, connected, and multidisciplinary approaches. Work in Ontario helps to illustrate research exploring the three themes through embedded connections to communities of food in the ongoing research project Nourishing Communities.¹

Keywords

governance, integration, scaling out, scaling up, sustainable food

In considering future directions for food systems research, it is useful to observe that work on alternative ways of conceptualizing food and food systems is in keeping with other efforts to resist neo-liberal pressures and transform society, politics, and the economy (Borras & Franco, 2012; Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010; Clapp, 2012; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Heynen, 2010; Leyshon, Lee, & Williams, 2003; Marsden & Sonnino, 2012; Morgan & Sonnino, 2010; Power, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2010; Wright, 2010). Somewhat unusually, through direct, iterative engagement with their communities of food, researchers have the potential to be grounded in the realities of their food systems. This more holistic understanding challenges researchers to find paths for food system transformation — so that the work is not only grounded in practice, but is also mindful of the institutions and structures that frame, and often confine, food systems.

Future Research Directions

Given the range and complexity of pressures on food systems across the globe, research on sustainable food systems can be clustered under three broad topics as the need for integration across multiple jurisdictions, sectors, and disciplines;

attention to tensions and compromises related to increased numbers and reach of sustainable food systems by scaling out and up; and appropriate governance structures and institutions.

First, it is increasingly important to explore different models of food systems and community visions of an integrated food system. A foundational consideration is that social, environmental, and economic sustainability find the appropriate mix or balance. Food is an excellent lens to use in unpacking related research questions, as human health, community well being, social justice, and the environment are understood as inherently interconnected when we adopt a food lens (Morgan, 2010). For example, school snack programs that purchase fruit directly from local producers who use low-impact farming methods make the connections among human, community, economic, and ecological well being more explicit. Additionally, food can be foundational to a holistic notion of life lived well. Food can be described as a vehicle for empowerment and social justice, as an opportunity to create community spaces for relationships to develop, as an essential determinant of health and dignity, as well as a way of strengthening the local economy.

Despite these synergistic opportunities, we tend to have research and organizations focused on economic development, food access, environmental stewardship, or food and health. What is needed is more deliberate work to amplify collaboration, for example connecting health with agricultural departments to link production and consumption more deliberately. It is also important to dismantle jurisdictional and political boundaries. Work on territoriality and flows of food offer ways forward in this regard (e.g., Garret & Feenstra, 1999; Kloppenborg, Hendrickson, & Stevenson, 1996a; Peters, Bills, Wilkins, & Fick, 2009). Recent literature reveals increasing interest in breaking down the barriers between sectors and disciplines to enhance theory and practice (Stockholm Environment Institute, 2011). A just, sustainable, and viable local food system is more profound than the mere provision of food (Nelson, Knezevic, & Landman, 2013). For example, networks of food sharing and reciprocity are important for resilient indigenous (and, in the Canadian context, northern) food

¹ <http://nourishingcommunities.ca>

systems and provide a valuable lesson in integrated thinking (Blay-Palmer, 2010; Skinner, Hanning, Desjardins, & Tsuji, 2013).

Second, scale emerges as a pivot point, prompting fundamental questions about how and whether sustainable regional systems will integrate place-based solutions (Mount, 2012). The scale dimension represents both intensity and extent of impact, from micro- to macrosize projects captured through “scaling out” and “scaling up.” “Scaling out,” whereby a project or organization is grown and/or replicated so it serves more people over a larger area, and the extensive dimension, or what Westley and colleagues would term “scaling up” by growing individual projects so they achieve critical mass to either provide a service to all people or are able to bring about institutional change (Stroink & Nelson, 2013; Westley, Antadze, Riddell, Robinson, & Geobey, 2011, p. 3).

For example, does scaling up equate with shifting the alternative to the mainstream? And can scaling out and up occur in a way that maintains focus on place and integrates health, environment, social justice, and economics? While there is compelling evidence that sustainable food systems need place-based solutions (Blay-Palmer, Landman, Knezevic, & Hayhurst, 2013; Marsden, 2012), researchers and communities must engage in critical reflection to preclude “defensive localism”

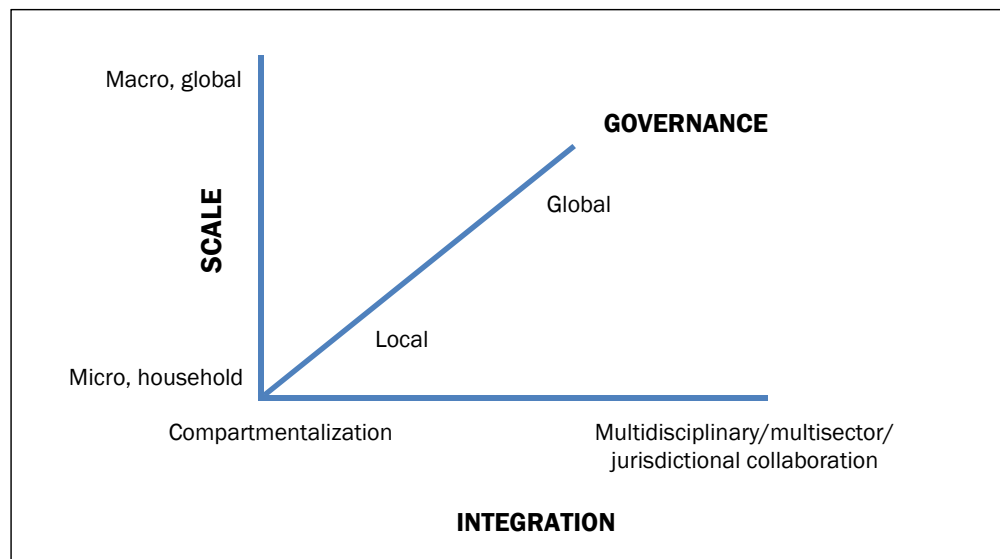
and address questions such as whether it is feasible (or even appropriate) for local food systems to emphasize direct sales or whether some form of agglomeration will be needed to develop increasingly sustainable food systems (Goodman, DuPuis, & Goodman, 2012; Levkoe, 2011). Related questions could explore network approaches (Sonnino & Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013), as well as the role of social capital in developing regional food innovation networks (Nelson et al., 2013; Tisenkopfs, Lace, & Mierina, 2008).

Figure 1 captures a continuum for the three considerations. The axes are not intended to be exclusionary. The scale dimension represents both intensity and extent of impact from micro- to macro-size projects. Scaling out captures what happens when a project or organization is grown so that it serves more people over a larger area. The extensive dimension, or what Westley and colleagues would term scaling up, happens when individual projects grow so they achieve critical mass to either provide a service to all people or are able to bring about institutional and/or structural change (Stroink & Nelson, 2013; Westley et al., 2011).

Third, the issue of governance requires consideration. Here, scale and subsidiarity merge as we tackle questions of appropriate intervention points from the local to the global. This topic intersects

with questions of power, class, and social justice through questions of “should” and “can” as we consider normative discourse in the context of grounded reality. The role of the state — in particular, the neoliberal state — as both an enabler and a barrier to community food initiatives, as well

Figure 1. Continuum for Sustainable Food Systems Research Questions



as related questions of private versus state agri-food standards and regulation, need to be examined *in situ* and through comparative work (Andrée, Ballamingie, & Sinclair-Waters, 2013; Marsden et al., 2010). Further research with historically marginalized communities, including indigenous and racialized groups, women, and increasingly youth, is essential to understand the specificities of appropriate (self-)governance mechanisms (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Ballamingie & Walker, 2013; Nelson & Stroink, 2013).

The governance axis represents relative capacities for decision-making and subsidiarity along a continuum from local to global.

The third dimension, integration, speaks to a number of considerations from compartmentalized or focused approaches through to multidisciplinary/multisector/jurisdictional collaboration. Depicting the three themes together may assist with differentiating between various facets of proposed and existing work.

Part of proposing future research is considering how to carry it out. Comparative research that works directly with community-based organizations to co-create and apply shared research tools and then engage in common assessment projects offers ways to develop more connected scholarship. More extensive work using concept maps (Mount & Andrée, 2013; Skinner et al., 2006), participatory action research, life-cycle analysis and urban/rural metabolic flows may help to develop, animate, and answer future research questions in more integrated ways, and will build on opportunities emerging from more integrated, multidisciplinary approaches.

What follows are the research topics our research team will continue to explore over the next two years and approaches developed through our embedded connections with our communities of food, in the ongoing research project Nourishing Communities.² This research draws on the three broad themes of integration, scale, and governance identified in the previous section. We do this to share both our research goals and research process. We intersperse current and future

research directions with a description of the methods we use to demonstrate the “how” as well as the “what.”

The Next Two Years: Medium-term Research Initiatives

The Nourishing Communities research project is built on a strong, embedded tradition of community-engaged scholars. The three broad themes described above ground our current research, which, in a nutshell, examines the micro-work that needs to be done to achieve more sustainable food systems that are not solely focused on maximizing profits. Our researchers work directly with groups who are trying to make the transition, helping to figure out what it might look like and how to deal with the challenges of the here and now. Our work in the Nourishing Communities project builds on the activist/academic tradition established in the 1980s and 1990s by the likes of Deb Barndt, Harriet Friedmann, Musafa Koc, Rod MacRae, Luc Mougeot, Joe Nasr, Wayne Roberts and Gerda Wekerle. These individuals laid strong connections with some of the most progressive food activist groups in the world (e.g., FoodShare and the Toronto Food Policy Council). They established a tradition of engaged scholarship that is now the bedrock for our work. It is important to recognize these roots as they inform our work going forward.

As part of this tradition, and consistent with much of food systems scholarship elsewhere, all the scholars involved in the Nourishing Communities research are deeply embedded in their respective communities. This means that there is an ebb and flow to our research as it is guided by the reality of day-to-day life and the pressures from the intersecting demands of our work and communities.

Our current research topics emerged from ongoing conversations with our community partners through regular consultation, participatory action research, workshops, and focus groups to build relationships (Knezevic, Landman, Blay-Palmer and Nelson, 2013). The research crosses urban-rural perspectives and tends to focus on small- to medium-scale organizations. It is organized into three regional research nodes, each

² This work is further elaborated at <http://nourishingcommunities.ca>

guided and informed by advisory committees composed of farmers, processors and distributors, economic advisors, academics, and representatives of farm organizations, nonprofit food groups, and local governments. While each region has identified research directions based on community priorities and researcher expertise, we are also pursuing opportunities for comparative work. The regional teams conduct their research independently, while constant reflection and the oversight of the provincial advisory committee ensures a coherent and complementary approach as well as inter-regional collaboration and tool-sharing.

In the context of pressures from the globalized neoliberal food system, and in a step toward developing more local, resilient, scaled-up food initiatives, the northern research node of Nourishing Communities is focused on innovative models for financing the community food-related infrastructure desperately needed for producers in northern Ontario, particularly for those operating at small and medium-scale production levels. The models being explored include social financing through community bonds; providing access to loans and financial coaching for the charitable and nonprofit sectors and community enterprise support and funding; and crowd sourcing. Community capital-building is another focus whereby businesses and nonprofits use monies that have been allocated for advertising and publicity budgets to sponsor and support community events and projects. Alternatively, infrastructure can be funded through local and regional governments and regional development agencies. Other alternative financing projects informing this research provide no-interest funding to food producers and processors; co-op “member loans” generated on every dollar of sale; and CSAs in Canada and the UK where investments are repaid in product.

The eastern research node of Nourishing Ontario is focused on two research areas. The first seeks to conceptualize the intersections between housing insecurity and food access (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2011). With a focus on vulnerable sub-populations living in social housing, this project explores opportunities for food access that offer fresh food and school supplies in addition to

pantry items, and allow clients to choose; urban food market pilot projects established in seven underserved social housing communities; innovative initiatives aimed at urban gleaning and augmenting the urban foodscape; as well as new regional initiatives such as a proposed food hub. In the case of food and housing security, while community-based actors focus a good deal of effort on food, as housing prices continue to rise, these food initiatives cannot get at the deeper issue of poverty on their own. On the flip side, however, the research is showing that food and housing initiatives that work in tandem, or food initiatives geared toward people in social housing (as one example) can do wonders to build community and tackle issues. In other words, this is a lesson in integration, in not seeing food (security) issues in isolation, and in understanding the structural causes of both food insecurity and housing insecurity.


The eastern and southwestern research nodes both identified land access for local, sustainable production and opportunities to help farmers get access to local, sustainable markets as research priorities. This priority correlates with the observations of a number of authors over the last 30 years (Barham, Tropp, Enterline, Farbman, Fisk, & Kiraly, 2012; Bryant, Russwurm & McLellan, 1982; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, & Stevenson, 1996b; Richards, 1996). They seek to broaden the local food lens beyond niche, high-end products to ensure it is accessible to all; therefore, we have honed in on initiatives that try to make the link between food access for all and fair livelihoods for farmers. We have been able to identify many examples of land access models as working projects, each with its own emphasis, including community farms that offer educational opportunities; conservation and land trust properties as land protection strategies; opportunities for sharing land, land-barter, and joint ownership. Other models offer private, municipal, institutional, or greenbelt properties with long-term rental agreements or special arrangements. Mentorship programs are provided through incubator farms and rent-to-own. Zoning and land use regulation are foundational pieces for sustainable local food systems. The multitude of examples for all these

key initiatives point to questions at the intersection of integration, scale, and governance generally. More specifically, they illuminate the need for a critical mass capable of affecting the food and agriculture landscape as a whole.

Assessing the opportunities for farmers to transition into local food markets is the second shared area of research between southwestern and eastern Ontario. Research focuses on alternatives that support new and immigrant farmers, as well as intergenerational and production-based transitions, including initiatives that facilitate aggregation from regional farms, as well as distribution, processing (both primary and secondary), and retailing alternatives that open new markets (Day-Farnsworth, McCowan, Miller, & Pfeiffer, 2009; Friedmann, 2007). Multiple approaches emerging in this area include regional and midscale distribution, aggregation and processing, and a constant stream of new food hubs that includes multi-use processing facilities for value-added food producers, and accessible retailers. Where direct links do not exist between farmers and consumers, certification and transparency are key dimensions of these new systems.

Three further areas of research focused on the need for different forms of governance and how to scale initiatives out and up are being explored through the southwestern research node. The first, supply management, is in many ways a uniquely Canadian challenge as we look for ways to continue to support farm income in those sectors that are supply managed (i.e., dairy and poultry) that allows for both greater flexibility and inclusion. Proposed solutions related to supply management are instructive. On-farm microdairies offer direct selling and alternative marketing strategies suited to many family-scale farms, while several groups are advocating for flexible or increased quota exemptions that would allow farmers to engage in more direct sales. The second research focus explores flexible and scale-appropriate regulation, including that of provincial slaughterhouses, municipal property tax, tax codes, and planning designations. The third research area investigates alternative approaches to and models for the aggregation, processing, and distribution of locally produced food that specifically address questions of

accessibility in an institutional environment. Intersections of food service procurers (Campbell & MacRae, 2013) and case studies that explore sustainability strategies (Stahlbrand, 2013) provide important guidance for negotiating space for local and sustainable products within institutions.

We examine these ongoing efforts to transform food systems through the lens of the three broad themes, looking for spaces where integration is or could be happening, where scaling up and scaling out are or could be taking place, and where new modes of food system governance are emerging, as well as how they could be improved. Through collaborative work with scholars in Cardiff, Ohio, Iowa, Maine, New York, Berlin, Montpellier and Kigali, we are set to develop comparative research opportunities. In looking at food through these lenses, we interrogate the possibilities of new social, political, and economic relationships not only in the food system, but also in the larger domains of sustainability, social justice, and transformation. As a result, we are working with a place-based research agenda, but are also cognizant of and influenced by the wisdom and interest of our collaborators beyond Ontario — a productive gaze across scale that oscillates between local and global. 

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