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"Food habits and Nutrition - globalization and its implications".

Martin Caraher

Professor of Food and Health Policy

City University London

With globalization, food habits and consumption –at least for some- are becoming more homogenised. In many ways this can be welcomed as it introduces what some call the new food democracy with lower food prices, freedom from the kitchen for women and opportunities to participate in new foodways. The middle classes in Delhi, now have more in common via food with the middle classes in Porto, Lagos or London than with their lower-income compatriots. A downside of all of this is that local cultures, food security and foodways are often undermined by these changes.

This cultural transition is driven by urbanization and the increasing supply of ready processed and energy dense foods in the diet. The process is led by powerful trans-national companies and based on a consumer as opposed to a citizenship model of rights. This has become the dominant model of food production and consumption based on a theory of economic trade liberalisation. So the lowering of trade barriers and moves from state to private ownership of land and food production are characteristic of this way of operation. A key point is that cheap food is an illusion. Costs are absorbed by someone, somewhere in the food chain whether the coffee grower in Africa who receives 11p per kilo for a product that eventually sells for £17.11 per kilo in the UK high street or the loss of local diversity, or the increase in food miles and pollution that the consumer eventually picks up in other areas.

New food trends and foodways are appearing and often transposed from the global south to the global north in terms of ethnic cuisines and tastes. So there is a trend for the global north to appropriate cuisines as the latest new fashion.

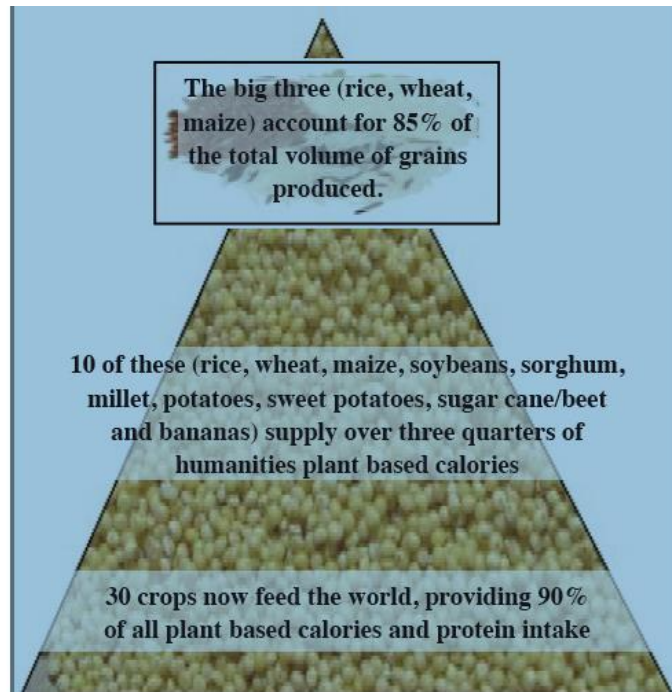
Key impacts of globalization of the food system include:

- Development of huge multi-national companies who control what is grown, where it is grown and prices.
- Loss of biodiversity.
- Homogenisation of culture.
- Less emphasis on public health.
- Rural communities in decline.

Of course in 2007 many of these assumptions were tested with the global economic crises and the rise in oil prices. New levels of food poverty/insecurity and exclusion not seen since the 1930s re-emerged in the global north. The irony with globalization is that as our choices have increased our dependence on a small number of crops has increased. This means that national food security has been comprised as there is little to fall back on.

At an individual level increased choice provides us with the opportunity to consume that which we like more often, it does not always increase our range of

food. This reflects a paradox in food policy which is left to our own devices we will eat virtually all of what we like 'a lot', about half of we like 'a little', and almost none of we like 'at all'. A similar irony occurs with globalization in that as our choices have increased our dependence on a small number of crops has also increased. So despite the 12,000 products on supermarket shelves, we seem to be still dependent on a small core group of crops. Thirty crops now feed the world, providing 90% of all plant based calories and protein intake., this has led to a loss of bio diversity and makes us subject to increased pest attacks (see figure below).



On a global level many products are now produced on a scale unimaginable twenty years ago. While the population has doubled since 1950 consumption of meat has grown fivefold, in 2005 China consumed more meat than the entire world in 1961. Do these trends matter? They matter in that they may not be sustainable and the solutions lie not in saying that the populations of China and India should not consume more meat but of global shift in food production and consumption patterns. They have

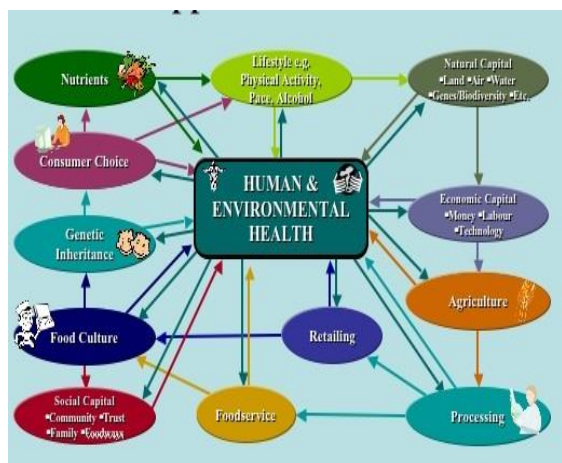
implications for food culture and cuisines as well as health.

The flows of capital, ideas and health benefits or favours the developed over the developing world. For public health nutrition the consequences of globalization of the food system and the nutrition transition means:

- Older and fatter populations with more people living longer and more people becoming overweight and obese.
- While there is some narrowing of disease patterns between the developed and developing worlds, the greater burden lies with the developing world alongside this are degradation of natural environments and pollution and ecological costs to the developing world.
- More uniform cultural behaviour with respect to food for some, alongside growing disparities in and between countries.
- Increases in relative poverty in countries and between countries -food security. Some countries have seen poverty and inequality increase which others have seen poverty increase but inequality narrow!
- Power moves from national or government agencies to trans-national corporations or companies (TNCs).
- Capital in the form of money flows out of the country and within countries from rural to urban areas.

- Local food systems and small-holdings developed over centuries are replaced with larger units, fewer working the land and implications for fall back (food security) in times of scarcity. This leads to changes in food habits/ traditional cuisines and a loss of food skills and knowledge.
- Increases in meat consumption and use of plant based crops to produce more meat.

The 'new austerity' has resulted in the emergence of a new lifestyle option variously located around initiatives such as transition (from peak oil) towns, local 100 mile/kilometer diets and local/organic foods. These are all welcome enterprises but can hide at their core another growing inequality in terms of food habits and access. The following provides an example of these growing divides. With the demise of the Soviet and shortages of basic foodstuffs, rooftop gardening has emerged as one way of addressing urban food shortages. In one district in St. Petersburg 2000+ tonnes of vegetables are grown. This arose out of the need to meet food shortages and food insecurity. On a similar climatic level in Michigan but a few degrees south in latitude, there is group of local food consumer "activists" –those committed to 'eating locally' in Michigan (see www.ediblecommunities.com). The reasons for these actions in Michigan are very different from those in St Petersburg; the Michigan group is focused on eating locally, methods of production and the origins of food. Here we see two groups doing similar things but for different reasons, one because they had to, the other because they elected to. The activity in Michigan fits what some have called 'defensive localism' where the development of local and alternative food economies are seen as bulwarks against the dominant system of food supply and delivery. Such developments have also been critiqued for being 'middle class' and niche in their operations. They can be critiqued for the level of social skills and social capitals needed to adopt an alternative lifestyle. The paradox is that some of the rich now chose to live in ways that the poor or peasant societies lived, they can do this as they have the resource and capabilities. The poor, now, have less choice and power to do this as their foodscapes are controlled by TNCs and the lack of availability to land and money. Peasant cuisines are abandoned by middle income groups in the first stages of economic development; then as the low income and rural poor adopt what are called Western lifestyle diets the rich revert back to eating modified peasant diets as they are good for health. This can be seen in the way in which the Mediterranean diet has been marketed to high income consumers as a health initiative while many of the poor in Mediterranean areas eat food which is high in fat, salt and sugar.



Conclusions

So what can we do? As individuals we can act as if our decisions make a difference, but think of scaling up your decisions about food, frame your thinking of food in the concept of the journey from paddock to plate. Ask questions in your school, community or shops about food and don't just leave it as an individual choice ask

your supermarket to stock local foods and support local growers. Think about making your food system local, local farmers, local owned shops and local (or regional) food are a good combination. Start with your own practices, then those of your family, community and neighborhood while thinking of the larger food system.

As professionals we can encourage others to ask and address the same issues in our practice and not locate solutions in the realm of the individual. The figure above shows an idealized food system which places the principles of human and environmental health at its center.

But most of all enjoy food.