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Integrating health, environment and society – introducing a new arena

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Bettina B. Bock and Martin Caraher ##addresses

##header?

Planning for sustainable food is an increasingly important issue for policymakers, activists and scientists alike and includes the manifold problems that are arising around food provision in modern and urbanizing societies. One of these problem areas is the relation between food, human health and wellbeing. This relation is becoming ‘common knowledge’ in modern society and helps to explain why food has become such a topical issue. It is reflected in growing anxiety about food safety but also growing interest in food quality, in growing/sourcing as well as cooking and eating well. Cooks and food activists become celebrities and ‘food books’ sell and interestingly many of them have built in the areas of health and the environment with cook books and television programmes addressing these issues (Caraher and Seeley, 2010). Good food and healthy nutrition are subjects of public debate and concern but also of public entertainment, as the growing numbers and variations of television cooking programmes tell.

In developing this theme we wanted to see to what extent the apparent public interest in food and human health may offer a promising new route of entrance into the discussion of not only human but environmental health and, hence, the issue of sustainability.

Does the growing awareness of the negative effects of the mainstream ‘food industry’ on (individual) human health, encourage more ecological awareness and readiness to change behaviour and actively engage in favour of environmental sustainability? Or it is just another fashion, part of the growing list of ‘exotic’ subjects, to be presented in reality TV programmes?

Some authors are convinced that food will promote ecological awareness and engagement (Lang *et al.*, 2009) and many civil society activities claim to act in defence of both. But there are also those who criticise this approach. Some consider the alternative food movement as an elitist movement, that does no justice to the inaccessibility of the new food markets for lower income groups (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2007). Others refer to the ongoing modernisation of the agro-food industry and their contribution to the sustainability of the planet (Keith, 2009), motivated however primarily by the scarcity and costs of resources in the first place. Some argue that health is only of interest to the industry when it adds value and augments profits; this is generally realised through modifications, which again is interpreted as ‘unhealthy’ or ‘unnatural’ by others (Pollan, 2008, 2009).

The list of concerns may easily be expanded; what they point to is the need to critically follow the growing interest in food and health, especially where it feeds into new policymaking and planning. We need to check whether ‘new food planning’ is split around the global north/south, class and income differences and may in fact perpetuate and even widen inequalities both within and between countries. Supporting ‘cosy’ initiatives of alternative

movements may, in a similar vain, distract from questioning the problems embedded in the dominant food supply chain. The papers in this section further elaborate these issues by discussing how the integration of health and environment might add to the development of sustainable food policies in modern societies and how this could be addressed without widening inequalities.

This section presents six chapters which in different ways engage with the concerns presented above. There are two examples of policy initiatives implemented at the City level (Malmö and Ghent) that are designed to contribute to sustainability within the cityscape. The following two chapters report on initiatives run by the third sector, including local charities and NGOs (hereafter referred to as the third sector) that focused on the accessibility of healthy and sustainable foodstuff in two low-income city areas (in Sandwell and Manchester). The two other chapters examine more conceptual issues such as the role of a food co-operative and the attitudes of working class (low income) consumers to healthy and sustainable food.

There are of course issues that run across all the papers - an awareness of global food problems, a concern with the environment and a focus on locale, whether this be local engagement with communities or the provision of local food.

#. The food-arena

In the following we briefly discuss the changing composition of the political arena around food, taking on board food, health and environment issues. We explore the position of local initiatives and the state, as well as their changing interrelations. This, as an attempt to sketch the broader context to be taken into account when studying, evaluating but also supporting and promoting initiatives that are meant to achieve what has proved to be enormously difficult – persuade us to eat healthily and sustainably. In doing so we look into the changing role of the state and the third sector, and the part to be played by food initiatives. We conclude by explaining what the present contributions hope to add.

The state and the third sector

Still today the state plays a key role in food politics, but that it is changing is a likewise obvious yet largely unstated issue although some have begun to research the area (Hawkes, 2005; Public Health Association of Australia, 2008). Many of the initiatives described in these papers are heavily reliant on the state sector for funding and or support. But equally the state is heavily reliant on the third sector to deliver and respond to needs in quickly changing environments that the state, with its cumbersome processes, would find difficult to realise (Poppendieck 1999, 2010). Third sector actors deliver programmes in ways that are more flexible than the state and or more responsive to local needs (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Garr, 1995).

Nevertheless it is important to clarify the relative merits of both sectors (Mawson, 2008) – as, without doubt, we need both to make lasting achievement. Unless third sector initiatives are firmly embedded in policy, progress made is subject to the vagaries of funding and changes in policy direction (Lang et al., 2009). With today's prominence of public sectors cuts, initiatives may be endangered, regardless of their successes, as the Sandwell case presented in one of the following chapters shows.

The third sector meets many of the agendas of the philanthropic ideal and they can deliver in a cheaper way and as noted above are more flexible in their delivery (Mawson, 2008; Poppendieck, 1999). Such a movement has been underway across Europe – since the 1940s –

following the establishment of the various welfare states.¹ The French system of ‘solidarité sociale’ for social insurance after the Second World War was conceived as a way of healing the ruptures caused by the war (Chamberlayne, 1992) and the British Welfare State based on the same principles of tackling ‘want’ (Timmins, 1995). These approaches assume a ‘common good’ where even those who don’t benefit themselves, consider it worthwhile to contribute to the overall social benefit. But even within this overall model of state welfare, charity and third sector initiatives developed – often to address gaps or flaws in the system. Indeed the European Union Food Aid Programme for the Most Deprived Persons, which currently has a budget of €500m, is mainly distributed through Catholic Charity agencies. The fund itself is a historical legacy of the surpluses of the Common Agricultural Policy and the feeling that it was best distributed through charities and NGOs than the state (Commission of the European Communities, 2008; Zahrt, 2008).

#. Food initiatives: food security versus sustainability?

Following the arguments of Belasco (2007) we may be witnessing a creeping invasion of the philanthropic model into food and sustainability areas in recent years as well as many sustainable projects originally founded on the basis of the common good becoming more commercially oriented. Gibson-Graham (2008) notes alternative movements often use existing economic models and add a transformative element to them without abandoning the dominant economic model of supply and profit. Kneafsey et al. (2008) elaborate on this point and make the case for a more elaborate but perhaps more fragile and susceptible capitalism. They argue that the reconnections in the food system represent a form of care. The new generation of AFNs have contributed to the development of a cuddlier and more acceptable form of capitalism so fighting mainstream capitalism with consumer-friendly forms of capitalism. But, the new AFNs have achieved a hegemony of place and product with in most peoples’ minds the ‘alternative’ being associated with locale and local sourcing. Two short examples may suffice at this stage to illustrate some of this.

With the demise of the Soviet Union the Russian people experienced 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 (World Health Organization, 1999).

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. The group have adopted the name Edible WOW (WOW takes its name from three densely populated counties in southeast Michigan: Washtenaw, Oakland and Wayne) are part of ‘Edible Communities’ network of local food publications (see www.ediblecommunities.com). The reasons for these actions in Michigan are very different from those in St Petersburg; the WOW group is focused on eating locally, methods of production and the origins of food.

The two groups are doing similar things but for different reasons, one because they had to, the other because they chose to. The activity in Michigan fits what Winter (2003) has 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. These are essentially

¹ In many instances the history of third sector delivery around food has been different in Europe than in the US, where delivery by the charity and private sectors was seen as a better and more efficient way than the state (Poppendieck, 1999). This was certainly true of areas such as food welfare but in the more recent past the model has been taken up and applied to the food and sustainability sectors.

different from food initiatives involved in addressing food poverty and hunger, not least because of the issues of voluntarism involved - the poor have little choice. This is not to say that low income communities cannot engage in efforts to be more sustainable, but merely to recognise that the starting points are different.

Another important consideration is that food initiatives while good at tackling issues in the short term, do generally not address the fundamental causes of food insecurity or unsustainability, often because they cannot and also because their energies (and expertise) goes in tackling the immediate problems. Rather than fundamentally changing the global food system, they are often attempting (and succeeding) in creating niches within it. So looking to the third sector to address the issues of food security related to sustainability and health are equally limited/doomed. They clearly have a part to play as providers of service, developing good practice and as advocates for change, but in realising fundamental change the state has an essential role to play.

#. The present volume

These various elements can be seen in the chapters in this section from the work in Manchester, Sandwell and Malmö through to the possibility of local food co-ops in the UK helping deliver on health and sustainability agendas. The work on food co-ops shows that the wider policy frameworks need to be in place otherwise you end up with policy discordance and a range of initiatives labelled food co-ops, which have little in common and do not make use of their collective power to change the system. However, some might argue that such policy disharmony is not merely a by-product of the chaos of food initiatives but a deliberate attempt to shift governmentality from the realm of the public to that of the private (Dowler and Caraher, 2003). We will discuss this further below.

The Sandwell work described here has a long and honourable tradition within public health work in the UK but the changes described above, in funding and the changing nature of the public sector, now put the continuation of some of this work in jeopardy. We know from work on food welfare systems that the third sector often steps in where the state is failing. In many instances it props up the gaps in formal welfare provision, but may also have the effect of hiding problems and thus allowing the state to further withdraw from services (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Poppendieck 1999, 2010, Richies 1997, 2002). It may be in a similar way that issues around food health and sustainability are being addressed by handing them back to the third sector and adopting them as social or consumer norms; sustainability would then become a standard for consumers as does ethics as exemplified by fair trade products. In doing so, the responsibility for the governmentality has shifted from the state to the consumer and retailer interface, which removes government from the task of having to intervene.

None of the papers in this section deal with the power of the conventional food chain or even of the nature of the urban or cityscape as major contributors to health and sustainability (Lister, 2007; Steel, 2008). This is not a criticism of the papers but more of an observation on the policy environment and indeed how we phrased our call for papers. The Malmö, Ghent and Sandwell papers all mention wider urban policy frameworks. Some chapters describe engagement with the dominant food sector but only on the fringes. The example from Malmö shows how the state sector can influence local growing and provision by way of its procurement standards. Many of the schemes described here are alternatives to the dominant system: alternative in offering an alternative supply chain (the Manchester supply system, the establishment of food co-ops and the Sandwell community gardening developments) or alternative in helping shape a part of an existing system (the Malmö procurement scheme and

the Thursday Veggie Day in Ghent). The research by Hawkins shows that the ways in which many consumers equate and operationalize ‘healthy and sustainable food’, is by creating ‘heuristics’ so local=sustainable. We should be aware of the need for individuals to develop simple but meaningful messages from the vast morass of competing messages out there.

The chapters highlight the links and connections between the various sectors, those of the state, the citizen as in civic society and those of the supply chain. Where the third sector/civic society stands in this triangle of effect (Lang et al., 2010) is of major import. Traditionally many third sector groups and their delivery of services has arisen from their campaigning and advocacy roles and services delivered such as food growing or food delivery have been ‘alternatives’ and/or small scale. This gave them a location within the system as voices for change. If now they are delivering services and wishing to become more mainstream, they run the danger of being part of the system and less alternative (Belasco, 2007). Such a move may also compromise their advocacy voice. This may also be a result of the ‘state’ bringing the third sector into mainstream provision. In doing so they achieve what Foucault (1979) described as the change in governmentality from the state to that of ‘idealised communities’.² In this instance the ‘idealised communities’ can be those that promote eating less meat, for example, which does not change the food system (Imhoff, 2010; Lang et al., 2010). What this may mean in effect is that government can effectively regulate through idealised social norms as opposed to setting laws to regulate. It may also relegate the activities of civic society to niche demonstration projects with limited impact. Our point here is not that these civic society or third sector projects should not deliver services but that they should develop mechanisms to ensure their advocacy role is not diluted. There is an old saying in public health, which relates to action and it goes something like the following: there are three course of action: (1) large scale social change and regulation- not acceptable; (2) doing nothing, just accept the status quo equally not acceptable and (3) do some small scale intervention to show you are doing something, this is not really effective but shows you are doing something.

What also becomes apparent is that the lack of any cohesive or comprehensive policy on food which explicitly links health and the environment and despite the obvious successes of the projects. The modern food system faces a serious dilemma (Flannery, 2005). On the one hand, it has delivered unprecedented quantity and choice of food to hundreds of millions of people. On the other hand, evidence has mounted as to food’s impact on health, the environment and social structures. Rightly, the dominant food system claims this as a policy success but the future is less clear, growing global populations along with issues of equity in the global food system raise serious concerns for the future (see the website of Olivier De Schutter the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food <http://www.srfood.org/>).

How to conceptualize, resolve or manage this treble challenge – health, environment and social behaviour crosses all these chapters. While there are no overall answers, they do present partial solutions and or indicators to how city and urban landscapes might become more sustainable. The challenge we now face is how to encourage – speedily but sensibly – the production, distribution and consumption of a good, health-enhancing and environmentally based diet.

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² see Coveney 2006 for a discourse on food

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