ELLEN SMIRL

SOCIAL JUSTICE DEFICITS IN THE LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT: LOCAL FOOD AND LOW-INCOME REALITIES

ALTERNATIVE FOOD MOVEMENTS have politicized food by drawing greater attention to the individual food choices that we, as consumers make, and by showing how those choices affect the environment in which we live. The increasingly popular hundred-mile diet is perhaps as far as you can get from Atkins or South Beach. Unconcerned with the number of calories, carbs or grams of fat, it instead focuses on where the food is grown. The local food movement has been described as “part fashion, part market niche, part social movement.” It argues that the current global food system is one that externalizes the costs of industrialized agriculture and places the environmental degradation and resulting social injustices squarely on the shoulders of the globe’s citizens. This burden has brought with it the realization that there is indeed a very high cost to cheap food.

The global food system

The global food system operates according to a model of industrialization. Industrial farming is highly dependent on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, requires large amounts of irrigation water, and necessitates major transportation systems. Critics observe that such a model is highly unsustainable from an environmental standpoint and has simultaneously created a world rife with hunger and obesity. Unequal access to government subsidies similarly characterizes the global food system. Subsidies take various forms, however, it is the disproportionate subsidization of the largest agriculture producers and food production firms that concerns proponents of the local food movement. These subsidies give the Lie to claims of greater efficiency for industrial farming.

Among the concerns driving the local food movement are food safety, the ecological impact of chemical use and genetically modified crops, the undemocratic nature of the global food system and the adverse impact on human health.
Local food systems

In opposition to the global food system, alternative food movements have proposed a “re-localization” of food production and consumption. Local alternatives include farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), food co-ops and other cooperative distribution and delivery programs. They combine one form or another of direct markets in which consumer and producer engage in face-to-face buying and selling, omitting the middleman. Direct marketing is seen as facilitating greater control over the food system by both farmer and consumer because farmers are involved in each stage of the production process and remain accountable to consumers who increasingly demand to know exactly how and where their food was grown. While direct marketing systems are credited with creating local jobs, reducing environmental degradation, protecting farmland from urbanization, fostering community relations and strengthening connections between farmers and consumers, we have to ask how accessible these alternative food systems are to the poor.

Class-based diet?

The goals of direct food systems are laudable, but a food system cannot be truly sustainable if everyone, particularly those who most desperately need healthy and nutritious foods, cannot access it. Nutrient-dense foods associated with better overall health cost more per kilocalorie (kcal) than highly processed foods linked to diet-related illness.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Research indicates that direct market consumers are predominantly affluent, educated individuals of European-American background. There have been efforts to increase low-income participation in community supported agriculture programs (CSAs) through financial subsidies, but in some cases this has attracted low-income educated professionals rather than working class people or the traditionally poor people towards whom such efforts were directed. Access to CSAs may prove particularly difficult for low-income individuals because CSAs require shareholders pay up front for a share of the harvest at the beginning of the season-something that is difficult to do if you are living paycheque to paycheque. Additionally, sharing the risks that are undertaken by the farmer is a greater hardship for those who have no recourse should they lose their investment. The geographic location of farmers’ markets often raise issues of physical, accessibility and since not all household items are available at farmers’ markets additional shopping trips may be required. Equally central to a discussion of the equity of local food systems are the conditions of food system workers that are often ignored in a romanticized narrative of “the local.” The local production of food is frequently associated with adjectives like “safe,” “nutritious,” and “sustainable,” But “safe” and “sustainable” are not words that apply, in most instances, to the reality of many migrant farm labourers. Too narrow a focus on shifting
food consumption to locally grown and produced goods can result in overlooking broader issues of social inequality which must be addressed by a more comprehensive solution than simply “going local.”

A way forward

Food Policy Councils (FPCs) are gaining greater attention as a means to creating more sustainable and accessible food systems. FPCs bring together stakeholders from various food-related sectors to make recommendations for improvements to the food system. They attempt to increase education and awareness of food system issues, shape public policy and improve coordination between existing programs. While FPCs are not necessarily dedicated to issues of low-income accessibility, they often encompass such concerns.

Toronto has had a FPC in place since 1991 and has made great strides in working towards the creation of an inclusive food system. The Toronto Food Policy Council has worked to make farmers’ markets more accessible and inclusive by recognizing the needs of people of low-income and diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds. Good Food Markets have been established in 18 areas of the city that cannot financially support farmers’ markets. These markets provide the community and sociability aspects of farmers’ markets yet also offer bulk food prices through a food box program.

Winnipeg’s North End Food Security Network (NEFSN) believes that their neighbourhood can and should be a place where there is “nutritious, safe and culturally appropriate food available for all members of the community, where there is access to local food production, adequate and appropriate knowledge of healthy food choices, and ongoing care and improvement of the environment.” The NEFSN takes a holistic approach to meeting the food needs of community members through efforts that include conducting outreach and information sharing, addressing issues of food accessibility, putting on workshops that teach food budgeting and nutritional education, teaching cooking skills and establishing food standards policy.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Neechi Foods, an Aboriginal owned and operated worker co-op in Winnipeg’s North End plays a central role in implementing this approach to accessibility. According to Russ Rothney, the management team coordinator at Neechi Foods: “Contrary to what a lot of agency people think, it is neither the supply nor the price of fruits and vegetables that is the greatest restraint on healthy eating. Rather, it is a lack of knowledge and familiarity with fruits and vegetable, and with nutritional and ecological issues associated with foods in general, which is the biggest challenge. The customer demand is simply very low for high nutrition foods that are not ‘comfort foods’ regardless of their availability and affordability.”

The STOP community food program in Toronto employs a community food centre model,
which attempts to increase low-income access to healthy foods while maintaining the dignity of the participants, building community and challenging inequality. Their model includes enhanced access to emergency food services, using community kitchens and gardens to build skills and foster community, using food systems education to teach and guide behavioural change while encouraging civic engagement of community members to effect broader social changes. This successful model demonstrates that involvement of community members themselves is critical in effectively combating poverty and malnourishment.

The “cheapness” of junk food is artificially created by government subsidies that support commodity crops, “cheap” oil and underpaid labour—all of which make possible the low prices at the supermarket. Pressure must be brought to bear on government to shift subsidies away from the production of refined and processed foods towards healthier and more sustainable food production.

Shifting food production toward the local can be a source of positive change. However, neglecting the inequalities that exist at the local level cannot only fail to solve existing problems but engender new ones. The inclusion of all community members in any attempts to restructure our food system must be a priority.

Further Reading


Neechi Foods Website: http://neechi.ca/about/

North End Community Renewal Corporation website: www.necrc.org/

The STOP community food program website: www.thestop.org/

Toronto Food Policy council website: www.toronto.ca/health/tfpcindex.htm.

Smirl, Ellen