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## Realizing justice in local food systems

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**For alternative agrifood social movements, food-system localization is both an ideal and a pathway to resolve environmental, social and economic issues in the food system. This article addresses the potential for equity within food-system localization in practical and conceptual terms. Historical processes have shaped regions and social relations with vast differences in wealth, power and privilege and this has implications for thinking about and enacting equity through food-system localization. If food-system localization efforts are to work toward equity, they must consider inherited material and discursive asymmetries within frameworks of economy, demography, geography and democracy.**

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### Introduction

In the face of an increasingly globalized political economy, contemporary social movements have turned to discourses and strategies of localization as a solution to a host of problems. Among the social movements promoting localization are the alternative agrifood social movements, such as those for sustainable agriculture and community food security. No one can deny that local food is good food. Comparing a fresh-picked, juicy, crisp apple in a community-supported agriculture (CSA) box to the mealy apple on the grocery store shelf, there is no question of the value of eating closer to home. Certainly, the festival-like quality of many farmers' markets outshines the experience of shopping in many a grocery store. And, who could argue against more fruits and vegetables in school

lunches? To the extent that people are trying to solve problems of tastelessness, processed foods and the numbing sameness of the food-procurement experience, local food systems can provide solutions. For other food-system issues, particularly those involving social justice, the role of food-system localization is less clear.

It is important to parse to which problems food-system localization is a solution, to which it is not and perhaps cannot be, and to examine if there are conditions it **reifies** or problems it exacerbates. The aspect of food-system localization on which this article focuses is the role that food-system localization can play in increasing equity in the food system. By equity, I mean both material equity (that is, the distribution of resources) and process equity (that is, inclusion and democratic participation). In

the time since I began wondering about compatibilities between food-system localization and social justice (for example, Allen, 1999, 2004), the local food movement has grown significantly, and the value of local food systems has become almost common sense for those working in the alternative agrifood movement.

Food-system localization efforts do not, of course, start with a blank slate. The context for local food systems has been constructed by longstanding historical material and cultural practices. These historical configurations have created great inequalities among regions and within regions themselves. That is, differences in wealth, power and privilege exist both among and within localities. In addition to differences that correspond to material resources, there is also differential discursive status and access, mediated through cultural relations of power. What are the implications of these kinds of differences for the theory and implementation of food-system localization? How are pre-existing economic, social and cultural relations of power and privilege considered in food-system localization efforts? What kinds of discursive and deliberatory forms are best suited to ensure democracy, given existing asymmetries? These questions must become part of the debate around the goals and practices of the food-system localization movement if equity is among its objectives.

### **Great expectations: the promise of food-system localization**

Alternative agrifood movements, frustrated with the ineffectiveness of global or national institutions in solving food-system problems, have turned to localization as a remedy. The emphasis on localization is part of a pattern of engagement of the new social movements that emerged in the 1960s, which tended to focus on the particular, while traditional social movements focused more on universals. In addition, these movements distrusted large-scale politics, preferring to work at a human scale, be participatory and not rely on large, centralized institutions. The localist impulse gained ground in the 1990s, both as a reaction to and a product of neo-

liberal ideologies and practices. Neoliberalism is constructed around the idea of liberation of individual freedoms from the state, working instead with deregulated markets and the privatization of resources and institutions; increased inequality is a result of this approach (Harvey, 2005).

Interest in food-system localization is a reaction to the destructive, disempowering and alienating effects of large-scale political economic forces. In the agrifood sector, neoliberalization and globalization has meant the loss of local farming livelihoods, practices and knowledges and has vertically and horizontally integrated agricultural processes on a global scale. Food-safety scares, use of genetically modified organisms, accelerated applications of agrichemicals, and poor nutrition have been among the harvests. In addition, traditionally unequal power relations and distributions of resources have risen to new levels of disparity through this transnational political-economic restructuring, resulting in increased concentration in ownership, labour exploitation and poverty. People have lost more and more control over the source and quality of their food, and have become increasingly distanced from food practices and knowledges. Neoliberal regimes and commitments have compromised the ability of governments to meet people's needs, and people have responded by organizing at a local scale. In both Europe and the USA, food activists argue that local solutions resist the injustice that has been the product of industrial capitalism (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). There has also been frustration with a lack of attention to social justice within the alternative agrifood movement itself. One of the reasons the local has achieved such prominence in food politics is because of the failure of organics to address social justice issues (Guthman, 2008).

Against the forces of neoliberalization, yet working with some of the same principles such as entrepreneurialism, people have taken action in particular places to re-invent the food system through localization. Goals of local food efforts generally include providing markets for local farmers and food processors, reversing the decline in the number of family farms, creating local jobs, reducing environmental degradation and protecting farmland

from urbanization, fostering community and strengthening connections between farmers and consumers (Allen and Hinrichs, 2007). Others see local food systems as increasing or embodying social justice (for example Feenstra, 1997; Kloppenburg et al., 1996). And, some local food initiatives are seen as inherently just. For example, McFadden (2001) states that community supported agriculture is guided by associative economics, which puts the needs of fellow human beings rather than profit at the center of the enterprise. To be clear, many of those working in local food campaigns are interested in other priorities and do not include equity or social justice as a goal or benefit of food-system localization. However, now that food-system localization has become the tonic note of the alternative agrifood movement, it is time to reflect on its potential to meet the movement's three primary goals, one of which social justice.

### **Spaces for justice in local food systems**

What is justice? What is social equity? While volumes have been written on theories and philosophies of justice, for the purpose of this article, I will use a definition crafted by food-system leaders at a California meeting in 2004: "A socially just food system is one in which power and material resources are shared equitably so that people and communities can meet their needs, and live with security and dignity, now and into the future" (Activist Researcher Consortium, 2004). By this definition, inequities in the agrifood system abound—low wages and poor working conditions for food-system workers, hunger and starvation of impoverished people and maldistribution of resources. While no one would argue that food-system localization can undo the inequities created by histories of colonialism, imperialism and neoliberalization, localist efforts must nonetheless be cognizant of this context. If increasing equity is a priority of these efforts, this pre-supposes a dedicated engagement with justice issues, rather than assuming that local food systems are necessarily socially just. In order for local food systems to play a role in increasing social equity, those of us work-

ing on local food systems must place our efforts in context and have clear goals. This involves (i) increasing understanding of the economic, political and cultural forces that have configured the current agrifood system; (ii) a willingness to analyze and reflect upon which local food system priorities and activities move in the direction of, rather than away from, social justice and (iii) establish and periodically evaluate criteria for social justice. In the following section, I touch on these themes within the overlapping and intersecting realms of economy, demography, geography and democracy.

### **Economy**

The hallmark of local food systems is the development of direct marketing efforts (Hinrichs, 2000). In Europe and the USA, alternative food institutions (AFIs) such as farmers' markets, farm-to-school programs, local label schemes and CSA are central strategies of those working to develop local food systems. All of these are growing rapidly. For example, in the USA in 1990, the number of CSAs was estimated at 50, and has since grown to over 2500; the number increased by more than 500 in 2008 and another 300 in the first months of 2009 (Local Harvest). In 1994, there were 1755 farmers markets nation wide; in 2006, this number had increased to 4385 (Agricultural Marketing Service, 2010). Buy local campaigns are also gaining in strength and popularity. The first American buy local campaign was started in 1990 and in 2005 there were 18 buy local campaign chapters. Now there are 74 such chapters in the USA (FoodRoutes, 2009). In addition, eating locally is a central feature of the rapidly growing international Slow Food Movement.

Many of those working on direct marketing initiatives such as farmers' markets and CSAs are working to solve social justice problems in their localities. For example, research in California found that the vast majority of farmers' market and CSA managers prioritize food security for low-income people and had employed strategies to address the needs of low-income consumers through various mechanisms (Guthman et al., 2006). However, this research also illustrated some of the ways in which food-system localization efforts, grounded as they

are in entrepreneurial modalities and consumer choice, are constrained by economic structures and realities. CSAs must work within the market model to meet the needs of low-income people through strategies such as donating surplus food, having low-income people work for food or having members pay extra to cover the low-income shares. Unless the CSA has alternate sources of income (such as public subsidies or grants), the logic of private enterprise is such that the CSA firm needs to be profitable or it will fold. As Hinrichs (2000, 301) observes, “While the CSA share, on one level, represents a significant step towards decommodifying food, on another level, it still must ‘get the prices right,’ if CSA is to persist and thrive”. Strohlic and Shelley (2004) also call attention to localized solutions to social justice problems. They reported that one CSA farmer explained that the members were very supportive of providing health care for those who worked on the farm—until they saw how much extra that would cost them in share prices.

In another example of a community-based local food effort, Eaton (2008) traces the life history of a Canadian Non-Governmental Organization that started out with the goal of localism as a way to meet community food needs. However, under the pressure of market forces and withdrawal of public support, the organization needed to develop a fund-generated strategy that involved value-added businesses selling their wares to elite tourists. Thus, the process of neoliberalization essentially short circuited the group’s goal of improving access to local food for vulnerable populations. Local food efforts are generally embedded in and must act within social structures that may be contrary to their ideals and values.

The point is not that market- and consumer-based initiatives are not excellent alternatives for providing fresh, local produce, but that they cannot, in and of themselves, solve problems of equity. As DeLind and Bingen (2008) observe, the market serves those who are able and willing to profit and consume and therefore does not inherently encourage social equity or democratic participation. An analysis of local food projects in the UK found that local food projects could not address changes needed in economic

structures and that the issues of living on a low income were often overlooked in the search for quick solutions (Dowler and Caraher, 2003). It is clear that local food initiatives have emerged and are developing within the framework of the social and economic structures of the conventional agrifood system, which constrains the extent of the changes they can make. While current structures constrain efforts to work toward justice, they do not prevent or determine such efforts. Indeed, local food projects provide excellent opportunities for imagining and incubating greater equity in the food system.

It is precisely at the local level that completely new economic forms that prioritize equity can be imagined, piloted and evaluated. Local initiatives are necessary proving grounds for creating and troubleshooting alternatives that can shape the future. In addition, local efforts can be embraced and acted upon sooner and more fluidly than those at larger scales. Gibson-Graham and Cameron (2007) point to the development of community projects that eschew private ownership relations and the appropriation of surplus by non-producers. Some CSAs hold land in common in some form of trust and decisions and profits are shared among the community. Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETSystems) are another example of a new form of social and economic organization within a local context in which goods and services can be traded without the need for printed currency. According to Pacione (1997), the majority of transactions made in LETSystems on the Isle of Skye in the UK involve food and gardening, and LETSystems have the potential to be valuable alternative trade systems in local food and agriculture systems. Many restaurants are now supporting local foods on their menus, and one of the newest restaurant trends is ‘pay what you can’ restaurants based on the idea that everyone deserves good food, but not everyone can afford to pay the same price.

In addition, there are economic spaces that can potentially improve certain social justice standards, even within existing market structures. The institutional food market, which includes elementary schools, universities, hospitals and prisons may be one of these, providing they do not replicate

methods and ideals of neoliberalization such as privatization and devolution that may be contrary to social justice goals (see Allen and Guthman, 2006). Institutional purchasing involves linking local farmers with public institutions that purchase large volumes of food, such as colleges, schools and hospitals. This market is growing rapidly, and was a \$30.9 billion industry in 2006 in the USA. In the educational sector alone (US Department of Agriculture—Economic Research Service Briefing Room 2010), 400 school districts in 23 states and approximately 270 colleges and universities have local purchasing programs, and the trend is toward expansion.

Institutional food purchasing programs can include social justice criteria in their operating principles and their purchasing standards. For example, at one American university, student activists protested the labour practices of the dining company and were successful in relocating responsibility for dining services in the university itself. As a result, rather than flexible workers, people who work in dining services became regular university employees with fixed schedules, health benefits and vacation and sick leave. Workers also became unionized and won a wage increase. This instance of bringing food service back within the purview of the campus goes against the trend for universities to outsource their dining services and proves it can be done. The dining services department also sets standards for food sourcing, initially including only local and organic criteria. However, the university's sustainability plan includes a goal that campus source products be fairly traded and socially responsible. Nationwide, the Real Food Challenge is a network of student organizations dedicated to creating just and sustainable food systems, including incorporating social justice standards into their campus food-procurement systems (Real Food Challenge, 2010). They are working on a calculator tool that includes social justice as well as local and organic metrics. Morgan and Sonnino (2008) highlight cases where similar social justice objectives are pursued in school food programs in Europe. For example, in Rome, equitable economic development is prioritized through employing more staff and implement-

ing a fair-trade procurement policy to address unequal transnational labour relations. Similarly, in South Gloucestershire, a 'culture of inclusiveness' is prioritized and labour issues are at the center of the school-food reform efforts. Moreover, Poppendieck (2010) argues that school food should be free for everyone and that school food programs can create 'good' jobs for workers. Taken together, these approaches point to the possibility of institutional purchasing programs serving to advance social justice in the food system.

Other efforts within the market that could increase social justice are labeling schemes that include social justice criteria. The Agricultural Justice Project—a collaboration of non-profit organizations representing sustainable agriculture policy, workers' rights, community-based food systems and organic certification—has been developing social justice standards for the food system in order to codify in concrete terms what social justice means in the food system. The Agricultural Justice Project's standards are being developed through a participatory process with input from stakeholders, including farmers, farmworkers and indigenous people, retailers and consumers (Agricultural Justice Project, 2010). The Domestic Fair Trade Working Group is an umbrella organization that, in addition to providing education about domestic fair trade principles, will review and endorse domestic fair trade labels and defend them in the marketplace if they meet the 14 basic principles of fair trade as adopted by the organization (Domestic Fair Trade Working Group USA, 2005). Of course, local food labels would need to be third-party certified to monitor and enforce standards. Otherwise, abuses such as the recent case of an American blueberry grower, who was marketing his produce as locally produced and locally sold, yet violating child labour laws (Patel et al., 2009), will go unnoticed and unchecked. While food-labeling schemes have inherent limitations and clearly cannot be the only strategy to increase action for social justice, they have potential as one among a portfolio of strategies, particularly in that they are a mechanism that can be enacted within the current market structure. Nevertheless,

local food system efforts must be cautious about reliance on neoliberal logics such as consumer choice and individual responsibility where social justice is a goal. Efforts to increase equity in the framework of local food systems will require public and extra-local investment and public policies, rather than devolving the functions of the welfare state onto individuals or communities (Allen, 1999; Power, 1999). While individual choices based on an ethic of care for others (see Tronto, 1993) can certainly be part of working toward justice, a concatenation of individual choices to improve social equity does not address the basic political economic structures, resource allocations and cultural conditions that have created inequity in the first place. At its root, inequality is a social problem that requires social analysis and solutions; it cannot be completely addressed through individual choices, which are already limited through the marketplace. In addition, those with the greatest need often have the least ability to exercise individual choice, as allocations of choices are shaped by the historical demographics of inequality.

### Demography

Food system localization efforts enter into a world that is already divided by inequalities across social categories. We are all aware that there are huge disparities in the global distribution of income and wealth among regions and that this has implications for social change through consumerism. According to the World Development Indicators of World Bank (2008), the richest 20% of the world's people account for more than 75% of the world spending, while the poorest 20% account for less than 2%. Compounding this situation are the structural adjustment policies implemented in the 1980s that caused extreme volatilities in food prices in many African countries (Kargbo, 2000), where food insecurity is extreme. But what about within localities, the unit of analysis and action for food-system localization?

Localities may—and generally do—harbour large social disparities along lines of class, ethnicity and gender. For example, in the USA, poverty rates are much higher for ethnic minorities than for whites in

rural counties. In predominantly black and Native American counties, poverty rates for these groups reach nearly 50% while the poverty rate for whites is only 13% (Cromartie, 1999). In California's central coast, strawberry workers are concentrated into neighborhoods that are poor; the poverty rate in one neighborhood in which many strawberry workers live is twice the average for the county.

Demographic disparities may be inadvertently reproduced in food-system localization efforts, particularly those that are market based. For example, many studies of CSAs have found that CSA members tend to be affluent, European-American and educated. Indeed, a CSA project in Iowa that actively sought to increase low-income participation through financial subsidies ended up attracting low-income, educated professionals rather than the working class or the traditionally poor (Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002). The authors write that "Increasing low-income participation does not automatically broaden participation by other relevant components of class, such as occupational or educational status" (Hinrichs and Kremer, 2002, 83). Furthermore, reducing the scale of human interactions does not necessarily achieve social equity, and small-scale institutions are not always more equitable or desirable. A survey of California farm workers, for instance, found that the majority preferred to work on large farms rather than small farms because they experienced fewer abuses and received higher wages on the large farms than on the small farms (Buck et al., 1997).

Yet a prevalent viewpoint within local food movements is that a sustainable and equitable agrifood economy can and should be based upon a family-farm agrarian structure (Allen and Hinrichs, 2007; Guthman et al., 2006). Nearly all local food campaigns and many of those involved in direct marketing prioritize supporting farmers, although to date there has been little discussion of other food-system workers. This is in keeping with American agrarianism, which upholds a belief in the moral and economic primacy of farming over other occupations and ways of producing (Fink, 1992). The greater emphasis on farmers than on food-system workers in the local food movement

inadvertently gives less attention to ethnic minorities simply because few farms are owned by non-whites. Taken together, Latinos and African-Americans own only 3% of farms in the USA and only 1.5% of farmland (US Department of Agriculture, 2009). In contrast, most hired farm labourers, not currently prioritized in most food-system localization efforts, are ethnic minorities. Workers and owners in the food system have interests that are not necessarily consonant.

In the local food movement there is a sense that, because people live together in a locality and encounter each other, they will make better, more equitable decisions that prioritize the common good. While this is a beautiful vision, localities contain within them wide demographic ranges and social relationships of power and privilege embedded within the place itself. At both global and local scales, those who benefit—and those who do not—are arranged along already familiar lines of class, ethnicity and gender. Given the disparate material and cultural conditions within localities, local food actors must be wary of the assumption that people within a community will necessarily have the same understandings or interests by dint of the fact that they share the same geographic place or are involved in the food system (Allen, 2004). Working toward social equity in local food systems requires questioning an assumption of shared interests among all members of the community when there are often substantially different material interests and power allocations.

In some cases, highlighting social justice issues can alienate others in the food system working on different priorities. For example, local food policy councils are illustrative of deliberate efforts to practice food democracy at a local level. However, these efforts have had challenges in addressing the diverse interests of their members, at times due to social justice issues. In an early study of local food policy councils, for instance, Dahlberg (1994) found that the formation of food policy councils failed where there was more emphasis on hunger than on other food system issues. We can learn from the efforts in Toronto, Canada, where strong leadership and commitment to justice have led to the

creation of a food policy for the city that prioritizes food justice, establishing the right of all residents to adequate, nutritious food and promoting food production and distribution systems that are grounded in equity (Toronto Food Policy, 2010). Toronto is also an example of a community in which people from many regions and cultures share a particular place and are developing socially inclusive 'creative food economies' (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006). Anderson (2008) differentiates local- and community-based food systems. For her, community-based refers to residents having control over and making decisions about their food system, while local means physical geographic dimensions.

### **Geography**

Most definitions of local food systems use physical definitions. Often they are based on a distance radius—30, 50 and 150 miles. Others suggest political boundaries such as the county or biological delimitations such as the watershed. What all of these definitions have in common is a sense that local is geographically determined and that proximity is important. Looking at space in an historical perspective, however, we see that place is the outcome of social processes that are fluid, contingent and ongoing. Thus, place is not only physical and measurable but also relative, temporal and continual rather than static. As much or more than sets of physical spaces, places are socially constructed circuits of geographically bounded social relationships that have been shaped and are being shaped through interactions with other places. Localities define themselves in relation to other localities, and these are often shaped by global relationships. Agrarian localities have become agrarian because of extra-local markets for food and fiber. Resources into these communities—capital and labour—are extra local, both in historical terms and in contemporary terms with, for example, the dependence on migrant labour for much of the local agricultural production. California's farm labour force, for example, is composed almost exclusively of ethnic minorities, 95% of whom are foreign born (Kuminoff et al., 2000).

Current geographic constructions and allocations of resources among localities and groups of people are the product of often-violent accumulations that have enriched some areas and impoverished others. As a result of historical and contemporary processes, localities vary widely in the resources they can bring to bear in developing local food systems. Prior to colonization, for example, Africa was food secure at a time when Europe was not. In addition, the development of American agriculture depended on mass immigrations to the USA, where Europeans evicted and exterminated the indigenous people in order to farm for export markets, importing slaves to do the labour. To this day, USA counties with high concentrations of low-income African-Americans are coincidental with former slave plantation areas in the South (Cromartie, 1999). Clearly, local possibilities are conditioned and constrained by larger political forces.

Yet one of the most-cited benefits of local food systems is that of supporting the local community and keeping food dollars close to home. But what responsibility do local food movements have to those in other regions that might be less endowed or, indeed, historically impoverished by their region? Again, local food movements cannot be held responsible for rectifying the scope of injustices of the past. At the same time, geography is not a defensible arbiter of the scope of caring, action or understanding. It is a type of defensive localism where actors consider themselves responsible only for those in their own localities (particularly given that localities have such different resources) or that pit their region against other regions (Allen, 1999). In addition, local food efforts must avoid what Szasz (2007) calls 'inverted quarantine' in which we separate and protect ourselves, which ultimately protects no one. Morgan (2008) argues that the dichotomy between local and fair is a false one, suggesting that what is needed is a new geopolitics of care, in which both local/green and global/fair are incorporated in the development of sustainable food systems. In his view, care is the responsibility of the public sphere and must be applied at a global, not only local, level. This requires knowledge at many spatial levels.

Arguments for the importance of geographic place and for local control are often made on the basis that local knowledge is superior to extra-local knowledge. Yet all knowledge is situated: it has a standpoint and foregrounds some data and experience while backgrounding other data and experience. Certainly, there is information and awareness that only someone living in a place can have, and this local knowledge is crucial for developing equitable food systems that address local conditions. At the same time, local knowledge needs to be supplemented with extra-local knowledge in order to take into account the larger contexts and opportunities for developing equitable food systems. This is necessary in order to understand, as Harvey (1996) frames it, the broader socio-ecological processes that cannot be experienced at a small scale and are therefore outside of phenomenological reach. And, of course, there is no 'one' local knowledge, since, as Feldman and Welsh (1995) remind us, knowledge is always shaped by divisions of labour and other social categories such as class, race and gender. Both local and extra-local knowledge are necessary for developing equitable food systems in places.

A recognition that place is a socio-historical process and locality is a set of relations can deepen the sensitivity and attention to inequality in local food projects. Local food movements can partner with other regions to address inequality and the policies that create and foster it, developing solidarity and expanding the scope of effective engagement. Some analyses and actions will need to remain local; others will need to be addressed nationally or internationally.

### Democracy

Participatory democracy is a necessary condition for developing social equity in the food system at both local and extra-local levels. As Hassanein (2003, 79) observes, while conflict is inevitable in any social-change process, the best hope for workable solutions to these conflicts in the food system is "through the active participation of the citizenry (in the broad, denizen sense of the word) and political engagement to work out our differences".



Conditions for this type of participation and engagement can be favourable and facilitated best at the local level. For example, Anderson (2008) suggests that democratic control of the food system is more likely in a smaller geographic scale because of face-to-face interaction and awareness of how the food system affects people in the region. People may be interested and engaged at a local level because people can effect changes that can be measured in visible, tangible benefits. For some, working at a larger political level may be too abstract, frustrating or disempowering.

As with economic innovation, it is at the local level that new ideas in effective participation can be developed and tested. Vigilance on issues of justice will likely be needed, even in inclusive and participatory groups. For example, a study designed to examine changes in food-system perspectives as a result of a participatory planning process found that engagement in the highly participatory process led to decreased salience of social justice concerns and increased salience of viewpoints unsympathetic to those concerns (Pelletier et al., 1999). The researchers observed that, contrary to common perceptions, participatory or collaborative approaches involving diverse stakeholders could possibly narrow—rather than expand—the range of values considered. My observation is that what tends to happen in group processes is that people often pursue the paths of least resistance, choosing and pursuing priorities and topics that are ‘normal’ and non-controversial in order to facilitate congenial discussions. In addition, Fung and Wright (2001) caution that even in empowered deliberative democratic forms, powerful participants may exclude issues that threaten their interests from the scope of deliberative action.

It is therefore not necessarily the case that working at a local level will enable people to have voice and power that they have not had at extra-local levels. This is because, as discussed, localities embody material and power asymmetries. In the USA, for example, women and ethnic minorities have been much better represented in policy making and deliberative bodies at the federal level than they have been at local levels. And there is a long history

of requiring federal intervention to overcome local practices of racial segregation in the Civil Rights Movement. Another example is that the US anti-hunger movement has always worked against block granting of food assistance programs to the local level based on the fear that these funds will not be used as effectively to meet the needs of low-income people. Gaventa (2002) observes that decentralization could undercut work on human rights, primarily for women, because most human rights work is done at the national and international levels. The puzzle is how to address social justice issues when, by definition, those who confront the most egregious social justice problems are the least powerful in the community. In the USA, for example, food insecurity is much more prevalent, among low-income earners, children, single mothers, the elderly, the disabled and ethnic minorities. Labour issues are of greatest concern to some of the most voiceless people in the food system, those who often do not possess English language skills or who need to be invisible to avoid deportation.

The achievement of social justice within local food systems requires an effective democratic process, including the empowerment of those who are most vulnerable and have benefited the least from current arrangements. This means working to develop ‘deep’ democratic forms that move beyond formal democracy. Green’s (1999) conceptualization of deep democracy takes us away from individually bounded rights and toward one in which the notion of the public good takes precedence and differences in experience are valorized. Forms of liberal democracy such as inclusion of ‘stakeholders’ and equal voting rights can only take us so far. This is particularly the case in situations where, according to Brown et al. (2003), the state allows the perpetuation of material inequalities. In their view, the measure of democratic processes must include both procedural democratic outcomes and reductions in persistent and substantive inequality in society.

Clearly, social relations of power and privilege affect participation and decision making. They not only determine who is allowed to be part of the conversation but also shape who has the authority

to speak and whose discursive contributions are considered worthwhile. As discussed, there are generally wide disparities in material resources available to people within communities, often with women and ethnic minorities having lower levels. Access to normal processes of deliberation is often restricted to those with greater resources, knowledge or connections (Young, 2001). Young lists two examples of participatory deliberative processes: one to restructure low-income health care in the state of Oregon in the USA and one to foster public consultation for the new South-African constitution in 1996. Despite outstanding efforts to make these processes inclusive, it turned out that neither met the goals of effective inclusion. The challenge will be how to overcome the structural inequalities, both material and discursive, that confront those working to include social equity as part of food-system localization. Historical legacies of entitlements, resources and privileges tend to amplify some voices and mute or completely drown out others.

These asymmetrical distributions of power, status and privilege—seen or unseen—make it clear why a pluralist form of democracy in which a diversity of people's voices are included is insufficient to meet democratic ideals of equality in priority setting and decision making. It is well documented, for example, that efforts to include poor people in local development does not guarantee that their needs will be met or that they will have control over decision making and institutional accountability. DuPuis and Goodman (2005), for example, point to instances of local food systems being controlled by organized crime, in which the factors of democracy or trust are not part of the operating logic. While the fact that relationships are more personal may increase caring and compassion, it is also the case that people who have few economic options or great dependency may be more reluctant to speak freely or raise issues that may offend their neighbors or employers.

If processes are not truly inclusive, even despite the best intentions of the organizers, or deliberation and conclusions are skewed by discursive power, the priorities and actions of local food projects are

unlikely to advance social equity. For those working on local food projects, special efforts need to be made to include those who have been materially or discursively marginalized. This is easier said than done, of course. Often projects have limited budgets and limited time. In addition, people who have been historically excluded may not have the time, energy, transportation and money to participate in local food planning meetings or may have different agendas than local food organizers. Winne (2008) and Bedore (2007) highlight the day-to-day challenges in the lives of vulnerable people such as the poor, homeless, unemployed, single parents, elderly and disabled as they struggle to survive. We need to be creative about finding ways to incorporate vulnerable people into a deliberative democratic process that can be used to improve both individual and structural equity.

As Gaventa (2002) outlines, it is also necessary to develop effective participatory methods, continually interrogating what constitutes 'good governance' in a way that includes both participatory democracy and responsive government. That is, while increased attention must be paid to including people in democratic processes, at the same time, there must be more attention paid to accountability and responsiveness of institutions, including making changes in institutional design. Rights of inclusion are insufficient unless these rights are accompanied by obligations to meet people's needs. Otherwise, they can be purely symbolic. As Kneen (2009) points out, the invocation of rights is a legal process that will be ineffective without social solidarity and commitment to the public good.

Working toward equity through local food systems also requires the setting of criteria and priorities. For Anderson (2008), the construct of human rights can provide focus for where the greatest need for reform exists and help to set priorities for action because it would clarify the areas in which human rights are most violated. Drawing from the United Nations' Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, she proposes six criteria for rights-based food systems. These include the absence of human exploitation, democratic decision making,

transparent access to resources for food production, including knowledge and no impingement on the ability of people in other locations to meet these criteria. Without specific criteria, social justice goals will fall by the wayside.

### **Conclusion**

Local food systems create possibilities for seeing the real people, social relations and conditions involved in the food system, leading people to think critically about the food system and, potentially, for increasing social justice. One of the key roles that can be played by newly developing food-system alternatives is creating the discursive and physical space for engendering social change (Allen and Kovach, 2000). This is because the ‘disruption’ of traditional practices, routines, habits, thought or reflection creates possibilities for social change through ‘enacted conduct’ (Giddens, 1987). In this sense, irrespective of the limits of the actual material or cultural transformations made through participating in local food systems, these forms can nonetheless create space for reflection, communication and experimentation with alternative social structures.

The local creates opportunities for inclusion, innovation and participation. At the same time, consumer-based local food efforts are difficult to extricate from the dominant political economy and therefore may inadvertently reproduce extant social privileges. Food localization efforts will be working against strong historical forces of injustice in their efforts to increase social equity, especially those that are focused on market-based initiatives. Dowler and Caraher (2003, 60) contend that “The problems of inequality are on such a scale, and their health and food dimensions so structurally based, that one could question the likelihood of food projects achieving positive outcomes, particularly those located in the realm of individual behavior”. In our research on AFIs, we found that people engage in the projects they do, not because they are not fully aware of the teratogenic effects of history and political economic structures, but because it is what they see they can do to make a difference in measurable time and space and (not incidentally) for which

they can get support (Allen et al., 2003). Local food activists promote local food systems because they can embody and demonstrate possible alternatives when other options for change seem foreclosed or beyond reach.

Is it possible to engage both these realities and still work for social justice? Can we understand the limitations of local food systems while still working for change on the ground? For local food systems to work toward justice, they will need to combat entrenched ideologies that are contrary to justice. Ideologies are cultural understandings of rights, property relations and entitlements, which in turn have been shaped by historical patterns of access to and exclusion from resources (Moore, 1996). These cultural understandings in turn shape the politics of the possible. In our study of alternative food initiatives, the most striking thing about the kinds of solutions put forward was the extent to which activists accepted the structures and parameters of the current food system (Allen et al., 2003). Local food efforts can build in and on challenges to these ideologies as well as what seem like ‘normal’ political economic arrangements.

According to empowerment theory, changes in beliefs and attitudes contribute to the participation of individuals in social change. In addition, the theory assumes that individuals will engage in social action and work for the collective good if they develop a sense of critical consciousness (Gutierrez, 1995). Efforts to re-think neoliberal constructs and agrarian ideologies rather than accepting their inscriptions in local food systems can become part of the deliberation, planning and implementation of local food efforts. Because local food systems are, by definition, working with particular people in particular places, these issues can be discussed in terms of apprehensible reality involving people and circumstances that are known, rather than as abstractions. Consumers, students and alternative food-system leaders recognize and place great importance on solving social justice problems (Allen et al., 2003; Howard and Allen, 2006; Perez and Allen, 2007).

Local food systems serve many purposes and improve the quality of life for many people.

However, they do not automatically move us in the direction of greater social justice. In particular, workers as actors and justice as principle are often missing in both theory and practice of alternative agrifood consumer efforts. Remedies include clearly prioritizing justice goals and processes (including showing consumers how their choices affect workers); revealing the causes and logical consequences of capitalist social relations; linking with unions and promoting the importance of collective bargaining for workers; moving beyond a discourse of choice and realizing that no social advances have ever been made without the combination of social movements and legislation. We should celebrate local food systems for what they can provide and seek additional approaches to problems that are outside the range of the method of food-system localization. In the face of global desperation and intensifying crisis, we must both work at the local level and create solidarities with those in other localities. We need to contextualize the local, understanding that place and community have been shaped by historical inequalities and work as we can to rectify those inequalities.

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