What’s Social about Social Sustainability of Local Food Systems?

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Key Points

- "Social sustainability" as a concept and empirical phenomenon requires more attention.
- Studies on the social impact of local food systems (LFS) tend to skewed on certain types of relationships, excluding others.
- Community development/resiliency aspects of LFSs in both the rural and urban areas need to be further studied.
“Social” ≠ “Economic” Sustainability

Assumption:

- Economic Sustainability
  (Profitability at the farm level)

- Ecological Sustainability
  (Soil health at the farm level)

- Social Sustainability
  (Quality of life at the community level)

What’s good for economy is good for society?

- Farmer profitability
- $ consumed
- # jobs created
- Causality, association, interactional effect?
Civic Agriculture

- In what ways does the *increased profitability* for farmers *socially benefit* those communities where these farmers reside or farmers sell their products to?

- What makes local food systems what Tom Lyson (2004) called “*civic agriculture*”?
  - Strengthen community identities
  - Improved the community capacity to solve problems
All About Social Relationships

- “Local” as relational space (beyond geospatial)
- E.g., Face-to-face interactions, trusting relationships

Diagram:
- Dyad: Farmer to Consumer
- Small Group: Farmer, Aggregator, Consumer
- Triad: Farmer, School, Student
Existing Literature

- The meaning of **social** to be sustained is still elusive.
- Although you can find it everywhere in the literature...
- Differences in the scale, scope, and focus of analysis make it difficult to sort out what are **indirect** and **direct** social impacts of LFSs.
Study of Social Sustainability

Scale of Analysis

Global
E.g., Fair trade (Jaffee 2014), food sovereignty (Holt-Gimenez 2011)

National
Food security, health (obesity), social inequality, education

Region/State
E.g., Sustainability/Resilience Index (SRI) (Green, Worstell & Ganarios 2017), intellectual capital flow (Schmit et al. 2017)

Local Communities (Country-level)
E.g., Food access & health outcome (Salois 2012; Deller, Canto & Brown 2017), community capacity building (Jablonski et al. 2016)

Households
E.g., Fresh produce intake (Rachine et al. 2010)

Individuals
E.g., Consumers’ motivations (Feagan & Morris 2009), farmers’ motivations (Local Food Linkage 2017), political eaters (Carolan 2017)
Social Impacts

At the Individual/Household Levels

Motivations/Perceptions
- Non-economic motivators drive farmers/consumers to participate in LFSs. (Carolan 2017; Fegan & Morris 2009; Local Food Linkages Project 2017)
  - Embedded relationships...

Behavioral Change
- Participation in LFSs affect farmers/consumers’ behaviors as both market actors and “citizens”. (Carolan 2017)
  - Deepening of knowledge
- Consumption of fresh produce increases, and thereby improving health outcomes. (Various dietetic, public health research, e.g., Rachine et al. 2010)
Social Impacts

At the Community Level

- **Health Outcomes**
  - Improved food access in the community is likely to positively affect health outcomes of its residents (Salois 2012; Deller, Canto & Brown 2017).

- **Entrepreneurship/Capacity-Building**
  - LFS development is built upon small-business entrepreneurship development, and therefore key to community-capacity building (Hinrichs & Charles 2012).
    - E.g., food hubs, food policy councils
Social Impacts

At the Conceptual Level

- Food security
- Food democracy
- Food sovereignty
- Health
- Social justice
- Self-determination
- Social equity, diversity and inclusion
- Community capacity building
- Community resilience

“…Local markets in themselves provide no automatic guarantee that vulnerable workers will experience enhanced welfare.”

(Hinrichs & Charles 2012)
Investing on Social Sustainability

- The volume on the study of social sustainability is very small...
By the Numbers:
SARE Grants, 1988-201

Number of Grants

People 9%
Marketing 11%
Soil 16%
Grazing 10%
Water 10%
Pests 12%
Specialty Crops 22%
Biodiversity 10%

$ Million

People $33.60
Marketing $34.50
Soil $76.70
Grazing $41.40
Specialty Crops $74.60
Water $45
Pests $55.50
Biodiversity $33.50
Challenge 2.

Future of “Farming” (not agriculture)

- Even if LFSs are profitable for farmers… who will farm?
- How does the vibrancy of LFSs make agriculture/farming as an attractive career path?
- How does it help new farmers access land?

“Sorry, pretty much everyone: young farmers are the least diverse—and smallest—group of farmers in the country”

by Nathan Rosenberg & Clay H. East, The New Food Economy (3/20/18)
Challenge 3.

Exclusion/Alienation: Who Benefits?

- Who are excluded and alienated from LFSs? (Alkon & Agyeman 2011; Slocum 2008)
  - Rural consumers?
  - Non-LFS participating farmers in the rural area?
  - Non-LFS participating consumers in the urban area?
  - Farm labors?
  - Urban poor?
  - Minority farmers?
Exclusion/Alienation: Who Benefits?

- In what ways the multiplier effects of LFSs in the urban community do contribute to addressing racial/ethnic divide in...
  - health status
  - food insecurity
  - land access?
Measuring Social Sustainability

- Community development aspects of LFSs in both the rural and urban areas need to further studied, particularly their impact on:
  - Diversity and inclusion of agrifood citizens,
  - Social justice of agrifood production
  - Capacity building/maintenance in these communities/neighborhoods.
Recommendation (1)

- A systematic evaluation of the SARE-funded projects is necessary to understand what we already know about social sustainability.
  - Social relationships at the individual level
  - Community capacity-building
- Need a more consorted effort by non-economic social scientists!
Recommendation (2)

- More projects that specifically investigate various aspects of social sustainability need to be funded.
- Economic sustainability should not be treated as proxy or prerequisite of social sustainability.
Our Farms, Our Future: The Next 30 Year of Sustainable Agriculture

Recommendation (3)

- SARE may expand the scope of *sustainable agriculture* to include vital non-farm production activities that farmers participate to build a local food system.
  - Collaborations, learning and trust-building over community-work
  - Leadership development and problem solving at the community-level
  - Network building: Density and depth of networks
References

Thank you!

For questions & comments, please contact Dr. Keiko Tanaka (ktanaka@uky.edu)

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