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Sustainable Food Systems: Building a New Paradigm

Edited by Terry Marsden and Adrian Morley

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Of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals agreed in September 2015, four were concerned with the importance of dealing with global food insecurity, climate change, good health, and women's empowerment. Although these four priorities have been given their own sets of goals and targets, there are cross-cutting sustainability processes and issues that link them. One sustainability domain that encapsulated all these issues is food systems. Food systems is broadly defined as the full suite of activities ranging from production, processing, and distribution to consumption of food, including the feedbacks that operate between these activities and influence their behavior (Ericksen, 2008; Ingram et al., 2010). Food-systems thinking is becoming a core way of understanding the problem of global food insecurity and environmental change (Ericksen, 2008; Ingram, 2011; Ingram et al., 2010; iPES Food, 2015).

In *Sustainable Food Systems: Building a New Paradigm*, Marsden and Morley argue that food studies need to embrace a critical approach which embeds core dimensions of sustainability. Throughout 10 chapters, multiple authors present case studies, detailed literature, and a range of arguments to demonstrate that linking economics, human well-being, environmental change, and different world views can contribute toward more sustainable outcomes in food systems. In their concluding chapter, the authors state that they have provided:

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A range of theories and concepts to explore questions of food futures, food governance, the public realm and procurement, adaptive supply chains, biosecurity risks, animal welfare and political consumption, and the current implosion of the regulatory and geo-graphical binaries between rural and urban spaces, all as new food spaces of hope and alterity. (p. 206)

Contributions to knowledge

The book will be of great use to students and early career researchers familiarizing themselves with the current trends in food systems, as well as some prevalent theories and proposed solutions.

The introductory chapter sets the context, and argues that there is a critical need to link food security objectives within a normative sustainability world view. The chapter presents an overview of key dimensions for a sustainable food system, including environmental well-being, intergenerational equity, governance, and economic reforms. The chapter identifies high-export agriculture and industrial agribusiness as key barriers to creating a food system that integrates greater ethical concerns for people and environments. These themes are used by other authors throughout the book, and used in Chapter 10 to propose a framework that links food security with sustainability.

Chapter 2 provides an authoritative review of the state of global food systems, and mixes a range of secondary statistical information with recent public, academic, and private perspectives on the future of food. Although comprehensive in its scope, the chapter does not provide any critical analysis of the themes identified throughout the reports, especially in the context of broader literatures. For example, the authors identify “sustainable intensification” (pp. 52, 58) as one of the main solutions to food scarcity presented in the literature, and acknowledge the term ignores other alternatives. Deep explorations of what “sustainable intensification” proposes, however, are not pursued (see, for example, Loos et al., 2014). Similarly, corporations are presented in the context of market-based and technological solutions (p. 56), yet a more critical examination of the role of agribusiness might have been expected, given the food regimes theories discussed in Chapter 1 (for an overview of the role of corporations in food, see McMichael, 2009).

Chapters 3 to 9 present detailed studies and arguments on issues including food governance, supply chains, consumer power, biosecurity, animal welfare, rural-urban relationships, and urban food strategies. Chapter 10 concludes the book, and identifies the themes of climate change impacts and neoliberal world views as two overarching barriers to overcome if progress is to be made toward sustainable food systems.

Critical omissions and future works

Despite the ambitious focus of the book and well-documented construction of the core elements of a sustainable food system, some gaps are noticeable. The first is the Western-centric narrative present throughout the chapters, and echoed by the locations of the host universities of the authors. This Western-centric focus makes the arguments relevant to industrialized food systems in the United States, Europe, Canada, Australia, and some rapidly growing economies, such as Brazil and China, but less so to countries facing the basic challenge of producing food in non-industrial ways, such as the Philippines or Bolivia.

A focus on advanced industrial food systems fails to shine a light on the multiple sociopolitical, environmental, and economics issues that permeate the developing world. For example, there is little to no discussion on the role that women's empowerment and rights in food production play in creating a genuine sustainable food system. Similarly, discussions of good food and healthy eating relate to affluent consumers who can make conscious food choices and have a food system that allows food availability to exist. The extent to which freely available food choices are applicable to the approximately 2 billion people suffering from hidden hunger and marginalization from food markets is not explored.

Finally, discussions of food governance and rural–urban linkages would benefit from deeper exploration of how the world's poor and semi-self-sufficient food producers, who continue to produce a vast majority of the world's food (ETC Group, 2009), are included in food decision-making processes.

There are discussions about landownership, notably Chapter 8, where the focus is on issues of community land sharing and the changing nature of rural communities to meet urban demand. However, the structural roots of land inequality, such as poor tenure status or corruption, which prevail emerging economies, are not brought to light (Borras, 2009; Scoones, 2009). The rural–urban discussions would have benefited from linking to global food system discussions, for example, using the ideas of Clapp (2015), who uses global market trends to discuss the sustainability of food. Alternative production practices, such as agroecology, could have been included to discuss how alternative production methods in non-industrialized countries present opportunities for future food systems (Altieri & Toledo, 2011). Finally, there is a crucial omission of debates around the root world views that dominate food system policies, critically the tensions between food security and food sovereignty (Jarosz, 2014).

A future publication that links their proposed normative sustainability paradigm with other critical developmental literatures will make for a more informed, globally relevant food systems paradigm debate. Furthermore, globalizing the discussion would facilitate crucially needed policy and political innovations

and experimentations with environmentally and socially equitable food system interventions. Educators using this book would benefit from coupling it with additional, critical literatures on food, for example, Wittman et al. (2010) on food sovereignty, Clapp (2014, 2015) on financialization, Borras (2007, 2009) on land reform, Berdegué, et al. (2015) on territoriality, or Scoones (2009) on livelihoods. Early scholars exploring the deep trenches of interdisciplinary food literature will benefit from the insights and rigor in this book, but need to be wary of the geographical and conceptual limitations. Practitioners dipping their toes into food-systems thinking need to be wary of the limited solutions provided by “new paradigms” that focus on industrialized food systems, without highlighting the depth of challenges occurring throughout the developing world. Only when both Western and developing country discourses align in solutions will we begin to genuinely work toward sustainable food systems.

Despite some omissions, Marsden and Morley have provided a rigorous update on food-systems thinking from an industrialized economic perspective, making a valuable contribution to the growing body of food-systems publications. Educators, students, and policy makers will benefit from the up-to-date insights provided by the book—as long as they understand the contributions need to be complemented by literature that deals with non-industrialized countries.

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