Exploring the dynamics of place-based food governance: a case study from northern England

John Lever & Roberta Sonnino

Outline

• In this paper, I explore the factors that potentially enable but also constrain the expansion of the relational networks on which place-based food governance potentially stands…

• Theoretically, I draw on insights from figurational sociology…

• Empirically, I draw on two periods of research: 1) 2014-15, and 2) 2016-2018

• I conclude with some reflections on what has been learned from the research process and how this can inform the work of practitioners.
Place as historically constituted...

- There is widespread agreement amongst scholars about place as historically and geographically constituted -- both as a site of meaning and as a tool with which the powerful can manipulate present and future action (Creswell (2004)).

- However, the interplay of global forces and local issues has remained largely absent from accounts of place-making (Jackson et al. 2009).

- In this paper, we look at the issues involved through an exploration of local food governance on the vertical and horizontal dimensions in a region of northern England.

Insights from figurational sociology...

- From a figurational perspective, the actions and ways of working that emerge within particular places are always dependent on networked forms of agency and the asymmetrical power relations involved across the global-local divide.

- On this account, the position of an established group within a figuration is strengthened not simply because of an accumulation of power, but because of an increase in the number of coordinated positions within a figuration.

- It follows that power can be equated with control over the social and natural environment and with the attempts of competing social groups to control this relationship (Lever and Smith 2013).
Located in northern England
Kirklees covers 408.6 km² & has a population of 431,020

A diverse urban-rural region socially and economically, to the north Kirklees is bordered by Leeds and Bradford, and it is here that some of the borough’s most deprived areas are located.

On average, residents in urban north Kirklees live up to 4.9 years less than residents in the more rural and prosperous parts of rural south Kirklees, which has a long established agricultural and horticultural sector.

This is the context in which Kirklees Public Health launched its Food 2020: From Farm to Fork Strategy (Kirklees 2014) to improve the health of local people, the functioning of the local economy and the environment.
1st period of research 2014-15 – attempts to foster horizontal collaboration

Benefits of growing food in Kirklees…

- ‘So growing food is one outcome, the food value, but you’ve also got the people who are employed on the land, so you’ve got local economic development potential… you’ve also got the social aspect of getting people with perhaps mental health issues onto the land, and then you’ve got things like managing land better… So you’ve got win, win, win.’
Local growers, producers and retailers...

- Local producers argued that there needs to be much more discussion about sourcing and procuring ‘local food products’ through local supply chains if a more resilient local economy is to emerge.

- Even if such products are slightly ‘more expensive’, and the ingredients are from slightly ‘further afield’, it was argued that they would be ‘better for the local economy’ and ‘intangibly good for the area’.
Tension between health and well-being and economic strategies...

‘In terms of the health and well-being strategy, food’s right up there as... really important, but it’s got to be there in the economic side as well and reflected in your planning policy.’

Food for Life & institutional provision...

- Despite the intensity of local food debates during the first period of research, Kirklees was having great success growing food in and procuring food for local schools through the Food for Life Partnership.

- To achieve a gold award, schools must be acting as hubs for local communities: all food served food on site must be healthy, ethical, and use lots of local ingredients, including a minimum of 15% organic and 5% free range; it must also animal and climate friendly.

- More than 60% of pupils must be choosing to eat school meals, be actively involved in the life of a local farm and in the planning and growing of organic food (Jones 2018).
Many benefits of working through FfL…

- Enhanced awareness of the benefits of locally grown and organic food; significant economic benefits in the form of new or enhanced business opportunities and job creation.

- Wider community benefits - improved educational performance associated with better-quality diet; increasing job satisfaction for teachers, as well as wider engagement in community events/markets.

- For national government, there was the added benefit of improved tax revenues and reduced welfare expenditure (Jones 2018), all of which suggest the benefits of relocalizing regional food supply chains through the development of a local food partnership were worth pursuing.

But expanding these ways of working was not straightforward…

- There was a severe lack of understanding amongst key players about what was happening in Kirklees and of what could potentially be achieved through greater dialogue, understanding and collaboration.

- It is ‘important to find out what food ‘Kirklees… are using in the schools and the public-sector.’

- ‘So it depends on what you are actually wanting, are they wanting to improve the health in North Kirklees, or are they wanting to build an economic resilience from the agricultural and horticultural small business sector [in the rural south]?’

- But overall, there is not much difference between competing world views of those working to further local food sustainability and those working in the conventional food system, just different and often competing understandings & policy priorities…
Second period of research 2015-18 – dominance of vertical governance

Corporate power & supermarkets...

- The issues involved came to the fore during the second period of research, when funding for FfL ended and attempts to develop a local food partnership were suddenly dropped by Kirklees!

- Such were the policy priorities/funding cuts emanating from national government during this period, Kirklees Council felt compelled to tackle local food sustainability by taking corporate funding and addressing food poverty through the sharing of supermarket food waste, for example!

- This arguably individualized a range of food problems linked to food poverty rather than addressing food sustainability through progressive place-based policies facilitated through FfL and greater collaboration, for example!

Concluding thoughts...

- Established actors in the ‘global food system’ strengthen their power and hold over socio-ecological relations by controlling access to relational networks/figurations of food provisioning and consumption – vertical policy integration dominates!

- Even when there is very little difference between the worldviews of competing social groups, this hinders attempts to make connections to places not as distant as once thought to facilitate the development of a more socio-ecological robust food system

- A place-based approach uncovers the relational nature of the local, thereby helping us also to identify the political and socio-ecological policies that are needed, across place and scale, to facilitate systemic change within the food system

- We have advised local practitioners/policy makers to work more closely with competing social groups to generate greater understanding of what is possible…
Paraphrasing Bill Rees from yesterday...

• *Place based food systems are potentially a buffer and insurance policy against the worst aspects of global change...*

Thanks for listening!

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Thanks for listening!