



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

Alternative food in the global south: Reflections on a direct marketing initiative in Kenya

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A B S T R A C T

Amidst booming scholarship on alternative food networks (AFNs) in the global North, research on AFN in the global South remains scarce. Partly this is because explicitly alternative initiatives are themselves scarce, except for those focused on export markets. Yet in countries such as Kenya, urban consumers and rural smallholders have good reason to want alternatives to agrichemical dependency, insecure marketing channels, and food of dubious safety. This article describes one attempt to provide an alternative. A pilot box scheme launched by the Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF) in 2007 aimed to connect organic smallholders to consumers in Nairobi, the capital city. It did not last long, and we reflect on the reasons why. In particular, we argue that efforts to build AFN in “developing” countries must take account of the problematic history of development itself, both as an ideology and as a set of institutions, policies and activities. In the case of the Kenyan box scheme, the pervasive yet often ineffectual presence of aid-dispensing non-governmental organizations, in particular, influenced different actors’ perceptions and participation in ways we did not fully anticipate. More broadly, this article emphasizes the need to appreciate the macro-historical and socioeconomic contexts that inform on-the-ground practices and understandings of alternative food.

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1. Introduction

Across the global North, a growing number of direct marketing networks offer small and mid-sized farmers attractive alternatives to mainstream channels. Options for farmers located near cities, in particular, include greenmarkets, community supported agriculture (CSAs) and box schemes, “u-pick” and on-farm stores, and direct sales to restaurants and specialty shops. Besides helping individual farms survive, many of these alternative channels both encourage more ecologically sustainable agriculture and educate consumers about its value—while also, of course, providing them access to fresh, tasty food and the satisfaction of knowing where it came from.

In sub-Saharan Africa, what counts as an “alternative” food network (AFN) is less obvious. Fair Trade and certified organic production have taken off in some regions, but both are geared towards export markets (Binns et al., 2007; Parrott et al., 2006). At the same time, corporate supermarkets are so new across much of the continent that urban consumers might understandably see *them* as the novel alternative to traditional marketplaces. Whether

supermarket expansion in Africa will benefit its poorer consumers and smallholders remains unclear (Neven et al., 2009). So too are the ramifications of the current campaign for a “African Green Revolution,” which promises the continent’s smallholders an alternative to decades of neglect yet promotes a fairly conventional package of agro-inputs and market reforms (Holt-Gimenez, 2008). In light of these uncertainties, scholars and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to explore the potential of AFN within Africa to improve smallholders’ livelihoods while assuring consumers’ access to safe, tasty and affordable food (Abrahams, 2007).

This article joins in that exploration. It recounts our experience with a pilot box scheme in Kenya, which one of us helped to design and manage. Launched by the Kenya Institute of Organic Farming (KIOF) in 2007, the program delivered smallholders’ produce to consumers in Nairobi, the capital city. More broadly, it sought to promote organic methods among resource-poor farmers by providing them with a secure and remunerative market. Despite initial enthusiasm on all sides, the program fell apart after several months. This disappointing outcome does not invalidate the box scheme’s original goals. But it does highlight the significance of the geographic, socioeconomic and cultural contexts in which AFNs either take root or wither.

More specifically, this case study illustrates how attempts to build AFN in Sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the global South

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must take into account the problematic history of *development*, both as an ideology and as a set of institutions, policies and activities. AFN scholarship has not traditionally paid much heed to critical development studies; this article aims to show why it should. We see at least three possible benefits. First, the field of development studies has long explored concepts and themes of central concern to alternative food scholars, among them community, voluntary organizations, moral economies, agrarian livelihoods, and the relationship between sustenance and well-being. This article illustrates some of the many points of intellectual overlap. Second and more practically, Northern-based AFNs that seek to expand their activities in the global South could gain cautionary insights from the many studies of less than successful aid interventions in global South agriculture and food economies.¹ Lastly, development scholarship analyzes such interventions in light of the larger history and structural forces that, by producing poverty, have made aid seem necessary (Allen and Thomas, 2000; Lines, 2008; McMichael, 2004). We believe that analyses of AFNs in general—not just in Africa—could benefit from this degree of attentiveness to the macro-historical and socioeconomic contexts that inform on-the-ground practices and understandings of alternative food.

We begin with a brief discussion of AFNs as conceived in the global North and South. The aim is to show how regionally specific histories of incorporation into the global food system have given rise to distinctive normative ideals and practical challenges in alternative provisioning. The next section examines how this history has played out in Kenya. In particular, we argue that the country's experience as an “object of development” over the past few decades (Mitchell, 2002) has shaped not just the infrastructure, institutions and social relations characterizing its agri-food system, but also consumers' and producers' views of projects to improve that system (Li, 2007). Through the story of the box scheme itself, we seek to show that the specific causes of its demise must be understood in light of conditions commonly found in developing countries. We conclude with reflections (cf. DeLind, 1999) on what the story tells us about the prospects for AFN advocacy in the global South.

2. Uneven geographies of alternative food

Now vast in size, the literature on AFNs remains narrow in its geographic scope.² The overwhelming focus on Europe, North America, and the wealthier parts of the Asia-Pacific reflects less a Eurocentric bias than the simple fact that most efforts to forge

explicitly “alternative” food networks have originated in the industrialized world. More precisely, they have emerged in response to the many problems associated with industrial food, broadly understood. Within the global North, Goodman (among others) distinguishes between European and North American AFNs, on the basis of their different histories of food crisis and resistance: while European networks have been influenced by successive food scares and concerns about declining rural livelihoods, North American AFNs have more often framed themselves in opposition to a corporate-controlled food supply (Goodman, 2004; DuPuis et al., 2005).

One can find many exceptions to this broad regional typology, as well as a cross-cutting distinction between “weaker” AFNs that focus mainly on selling alternative food *qualities* versus “stronger” ones that also aim to build genuinely alternative food *networks* (Watts et al., 2005). We will return to the question of how quality is constructed, in and beyond AFNs. Here, though, we want to consider two goals widely shared by participants in alternative food networks in the global North: provisioning based firstly on *shorter food supply chains* (SFSC) and secondly on *community*. As many scholars have observed, these two ideals draw some of their potency from consumers' nostalgia (Dowler et al., 2010; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000). But popular longing for a bucolic, better-fed imagined past does not by itself explain the ongoing explosion of AFNs in the global North. Certain concrete conditions have made these ideals seem both desirable and viable, and they are not universal.

2.1. Shorter is relative

While diverse, SFSC tend to share the following characteristics: first, they “short-circuit” the industrial system of food provisioning by cutting out at least some of the typical intermediaries. Second, “value-laden” information about provenance serves to improve transparency and thus forge a closer connection between producers and consumers. And lastly, many SFSC are localized, and thus literally shorter (Renting et al., 2003). For producers, SFSC appeal insofar as they offer higher and more reliable returns, and outlets for goods or services unmarketable through conventional channels, e.g. those controlled by supermarkets, processors and other intermediary firms. SFSC that circumvent these intermediaries can help to sustain producer livelihoods that would not otherwise be viable—livelihoods that may in turn help to preserve valued cultivars, culinary traditions, landscapes and ecosystems (Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Sage, 2003).

For many consumers, part of the appeal of SFSC lies in knowing that their food purchases can play this preservative role (Winter, 2003a). Indeed, this knowledge helps to justify the commonly higher price of food sourced through shorter chains—a price, in popular rhetoric, that reflects food's “true cost” (Pollan, 2006). Here many contemporary SFSC differ from earlier generations of consumer cooperatives, which offered members not just the satisfaction of circumventing “parasitic” middlemen, but also *lower* prices (Furlough and Strikwerda, 1999; Meusy, 2001).

Yet now as in the past, values alone do not sell alternative food. At a time of rampant fraud and adulteration, late nineteenth century co-ops promised their members fair measures and pure products. Similarly, at a time when many food scares have implicated imports and industrial producers, today's SFSC promise goods direct (or nearly so) from small farmers and purveyors. *Shorter* implies safer—as well as fresher, more healthful, and tastier than whatever the industrial food system has been able to provide, at least in recent history. It is worth noting, however, that consumers' understandings of these qualities have been shaped by the longer history of industrial food in the global North (Freidberg, 2009;

¹ This literature is immense; older but still relevant studies include Ferguson, J., 1990. *The Anti-politics Machine: “Development”, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [England]; New York, Schroeder, 1999b. *Shady Practices: Agroforestry and Gender Politics in the Gambia*. University of California Press, Berkeley. Crewe and Harrison, 1998. *Whose Development?: An Ethnography of Aid*. Zed Books, London.

² Useful overviews include Follett, 2009. Choosing a food future: differentiating among alternative food options. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 22, 31–51. Maye et al., 2007. Introducing alternative food geographies. In: Maye, D., Holloway, L., Kneafsey, M. (Eds.), *Alternative Food Geographies: Representation and Practice*, first ed. Elsevier, Oxford, pp. 1–22. Watts, D., Ilbery, B., Maye, D., 2005. Making reconnections in agro-food geography: alternative systems of food provision. *Progress in Human Geography* 29, 22. Whatmore et al., 2003. What's alternative about alternative food networks? *Environment and Planning A* 35, 389–392. Winter, 2003b. Geographies of food: agro-food geographies making reconnections. *Progress in Human Geography* 27, 505. For discussions of why the scholarship on alternative food and “post-productivist” agriculture has neglected the global South, see Abrahams, 2008. Illegitimate voices, peripheral debates, valid alternatives: A developing world articulation of alternative food networks. *School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies*. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Wilson and Rigg, 2003. ‘Post-productivist’ agricultural regimes and the South: discordant concepts? *Progress in Human Geography* 27, 681–707.

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