

# *Rethinking justice in city-regional food systems planning*

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# Rethinking justice in city-regional food systems planning

This paper offers a rethinking of justice in city-regional food systems planning from the perspective of urban food enterprise (UFE). UFEs are socially innovative business practices that seek alternative, local responses to conventional food systems, from inputs through to resource recovery and waste management. They operate under several legal designations, with diversity in both the scale and scope of business practices that span all stages of this cycle. Yet in this paper I highlight how the pluralism of these urban initiatives offers a means toward rethinking the idea of justice in city-regional food systems planning. I argue that when UFEs are framed as emergent and co-evolutionary practices, the act of doing food justice is consequently a function of pragmatic real-life choices for these organisations. Moreover, while this embrace of the pluralism of UFE practices in cities requires an appreciation of the diversity of entrepreneurial activity, the act of doing food justice raises fundamental questions surrounding what constitutes a *pragmatist ethics* in city-regional food systems planning.

Keywords: city and regional food systems, utopia, justice, pragmatism, pluralism

## Introduction

A food system is a cumulative measure of the processes undertaken throughout the food value stream or cycle, from inputs to production, processing, distribution, access, consumption, and resource recovery and waste management. References to city-regional food systems are suggestive of efforts to close this food cycle at these geographical levels, through which food-based justice outcomes can be enhanced by increasing an individual's right to grow, sell and eat fresh, nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food.

However, Cadieux and Slocum (2015) note that, while the principles of justice may be gaining recognition, it remains unclear whether those who claim to be practicing food justice are doing anything fundamentally different. The authors suggest this problem may be attributed to what “scholars, activists, and policymakers have identified as socially just ways of working toward equitable food systems.” (Ibid, p. 11). Moreover, food justice advocates argue that the current global neoliberal industrial food system is ‘broken’ and challenge its ideological and market dominance. The problem with the idea of [food] justice as a ‘metaphor we live by’ is that it can signify some ‘thing’ different for those who put it to practice. This is a problem for food justice scholars, which has been heightened by recent discussions around the ‘re-regionalisation’ of food (Donald et al 2010). Such discussions re-introduce a scalar dimension to the practice of *doing* food justice, which extends beyond local initiatives to consider broader fundamental land use planning challenges around circular economies and ecosystems services, and controversial land and food questions surrounding competing land uses between housing needs, food security and environmental quality.

This resurgence of the ‘region’ in food systems planning discourses can be traced to a long evolutionary tradition of regional planning practice. That is, the current interests in city-regional food systems planning have been supported by high-tech urban development in newly industrialising countries, and the urban retrofitting of the built environment in city-regions of industrially advanced countries (Nunes 2017). These projects include both residential and commercial developments such as *Oosterwald* in Almere, The Netherlands, *Sky Greens* in Singapore, and the pending largest roof garden at *The Hills at Vallco* in California, USA. In the food retail sector, “alternative” food entrepreneurs have been tied into other property-led initiatives globally such as *Time Out* markets. Major supermarket retailers similarly present their operations as both environmental and food sustainable such as the recent Albert Heijn supermarket in Puremerend, The Netherlands, which claims to be the most sustainable in Europe.

Despite the commendable advances of all these projects and their potential to play a significant role in more just forms of development through city-regional food systems planning, the “redistribution dilemma” (ref) for regional planning practice remains a major challenge. Moreover, addressing the question of food justice through city-regional food systems planning is no less of a challenge: on one level, city-regional food systems planning is the responsibility of national jurisdictions and local public health and planning policies.

Yet on another it can be one of individual and community responsibility, whereby re-localisation strategies may be positioned as direct challengers to the ideological and market dominance of a global industrial food system. At the same time, the powers of the state to promote food justice is limited by international trade rules and the rights of multinational corporations to trade freely, which consequently shapes macro-economic conditions that determine or constrain national, and local and community politics.

As the numbers of high-profile city-regional environmental and food-related initiatives become more apparent, against the traditional ‘productivist’ model of rural development policy and international aid programmes, an attention to the role of the urban space and the processes of urbanising agricultural practices becomes imperative. This is ultimately an appreciation of the conflation of the urban and rural, where urban agriculture-led regeneration efforts can have positive consequences for peri-urban conservation and rural revitalisation efforts. In this paper, I focus on the particular role that urban food enterprises (UFE) occupy in this city-regional space, which straddles the above urban-global governance, and urban-rural development divides as a negotiated economic space that is premised on an ability to deliver more effectively on food justice-related outcomes.

There is no hard and fast definition of what constitutes these enterprises. Nevertheless, these socially innovative business practices seek alternative, local responses to conventional food systems, from inputs through to resource recovery and waste management. They operate under several legal designations, with diversity in both the scale and scope of business practices that span all stages of this cycle. Yet in this paper I highlight how the pluralism of these urban initiatives offers a means toward rethinking the idea of justice in city-regional food systems planning. Amin and Thrift, in their book *Arts of the Political* (2013), argue against a “return to a singular and steadfast politics of transformation, clear about the enemy and the goal” (p. 107). “The times have become far too plural, autonomous and distributed for such a singular politics” (p. 108). This claim is rooted in the writings of a pragmatist and pluralist tradition. It “turns away from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretend absolutes and origins [...] toward concreteness and adequacy, toward fact, toward action, and toward power” (James 1995, p. 20), and toward the pluralism of “layered practices of connection across multiple differences” (Connolly 2005, p. 66).

I argue that when UFEs are framed as emergent and co-evolutionary practices, the act of doing food justice is consequently a function of pragmatic real-life choices for these organisations. That is, these organisational practices can amount to a choice between either maintaining control over their missions or compromising on their ideals in a push for survival as an organisation (Parker and Nunes, in preparation). Moreover, while this embrace of the pluralism of UFE practices in cities requires an appreciation of the diversity of entrepreneurial activity contributing to city-regional food systems, the act of *doing* food justice raises fundamental questions surrounding what constitutes a pragmatist ethics in city-regional food systems planning.

### **Situating the urban food enterprise in city-regional food systems**

UFEs play a significant role in generating socio-economic and climate benefits. This community of craft and micro enterprises is diverse with regards to their ideological motivations and business models. Though their funding streams, albeit varied, often rely on some form of grant-funded scheme at some stage in their development. This reliance on grants subjects the viability of these enterprises and their potential benefits to local and regional economies, the environment and their communities to financial risk. The need to identify commercially viable business models that secure their motives and potential benefits leads many of these enterprises to occasionally make contradicting decisions over retail and labour, for example. The view of some members of these organisations argues that core ideals such as the practice of doing food justice is compromised; others find it a necessary measure to ensure the enterprise can be sustained and in turn the potential for delivering on its mission. This dilemma is particularly apparent when these enterprises are faced with the prospect of scaling up their operations and/or obtaining new economies of scale.

In this section, I draw on a collaborative pilot study (Nunes et al, 2015) of UFEs in London (UK), Reading (UK) and Almere (NL) and their consumers. This study set out to understand the socio-economic and policy

context of UFEs, and how it influenced not only their economic contribution to the communities they served, but also their wider services to society including climate impact. These public services may include work in disadvantaged urban communities, as well as the engagement of unemployed youth, and other non-food outcomes as evident in the *Growing for Health* campaign in London (UK). UFEs consciously have set about to deliver on many of these other public services and thus have built them into their business practices.

The study adopted a range of quantitative and qualitative methods. Online surveys of UFEs, and UFE consumers were carried out during the course of the project. The UFE survey was directed at members with detailed knowledge of their organisation, including the share of paid/voluntary work, legal and finance structure, and annual turnover amongst other factors concerning its operations. Participation was encouraged from those UFEs and UFE consumers located in, or within a 30-mile (50km) radius of the edge of their respective case study city. This decision considered the many attempts that have been made to define what constitutes a local food system, and the remaining absence of any consensual view on the matter. The surveys were complemented by stakeholder interviews; stakeholder observations and consultation; workshops; and literature reviews.

### *Food systems, flows and barriers to city-regional food systems*

London/Reading-based UFEs, engaged in food retail/catering, source over 75% of their produce from outside of the city. This appears to remain the case despite estimates by London/Reading UFEs, engaged in food processing, who claim 90% of their produce post-processing stays within the city in which they are located; this share exceeds that of their Dutch counterparts. It also suggests that there are no significant levels of trade and interaction between UFEs. An alternative suggestion is that demand for the type of food being retailed outstrips city supply and thus has to be sourced elsewhere because of the requirements for a wider range of food products.

This in turn points to some of the real-life challenges UFEs face when trying to: (i) establish their own identity; (ii) distinguish themselves from the other actors operating within the many arenas that they inhabit; and (iii) convey this identity to consumers and other actors with whom they interact. Other noted barriers include: the inability to compete with the economies of scale of mainstream competitors; achieving a consistent supply of produce; consumer resistance to change in habits (where consumers do not value the UFE value proposition); small market potential/market access; the ability to judge the value/price of produce; and maintaining a distinctive marketing edge. Altogether, these challenges would accompany any value proposition for a product that is not standard.

### *Embracing the diversity of Urban Food Enterprises*

As part of local and city-regional food systems, UFEs negotiate different relations with actors across their associated supply chains and wider geographical systems of production. Globally, they are associated to Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) of an emerging array of producers, consumers, and other actors that embody alternative responses to conventional food systems, from inputs through to resource recovery and waste management. These AFNs may represent or be sympathetic to a number of self-styled alternative food movements in existence today, notably the Food Sovereignty Movement, the Food Justice Movement, and the Slow Food Movement. Food also falls within the remit of other broader social movements such as the Transition Network.

This broad mix of organisations, alternative food networks, and social movements makes any well-meaning attempt to rationalise 'Alternative Food Movement' practices in an urban area difficult. Considering the complex landscape within which UFEs interact and overlap with different stages of the food cycle, we began by observing the activities that different UFEs undertake, and how they subsequently identify themselves within their different arenas of practice. By drawing upon these practices and the subsequent terms used by UFEs to identify themselves, Table 1 provides an extensive overview of the different types of UFEs that were found to be operating within the case study cities.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Though it is important to recognise that the types of operations a food business undertakes do not intrinsically distinguish it as being a UFE. For example, a box scheme could be run on a non-cooperative basis, aimed at producing profit for shareholders, with organically- or non- organically-produced goods sourced as a means of reducing costs and increasing profit. To assume the term ‘box scheme’ refers to a type of UFE would therefore be a misapplication of the term. Box schemes aggregate produce, package it into customer orders and deliver to each customer’s address of choice. These processes can be carried out in a variety of ways, with contrasting positive and negative socio-ecological outcomes. Additionally, some actors may strive to secure positive socio-ecological outcomes, yet consciously or unconsciously fail to achieve these within their operations. As such, it is the precise modes of practice employed by these organisations when undertaking their operations that ultimately dictate their identity as a UFE.

Having given credence to these obvious ambiguities, we acknowledged that the term ‘box scheme’ has reasonably come to signify many of the positive socio-ecological attributes commonly sought by UFEs. In keeping with this approach, Figure 1 seeks offers a distinction between those terms that have reasonably come to represent a UFE (red), and those that have not (green). In the cases of those that have not, this is often because the terms used are commonly applied in more conventional contexts, or they are too general to be considered as classifications of UFEs.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

Though having identified some of the complexities involved in categorising types of UFEs, it is also important to acknowledge that many UFEs incorporate a number of the above types. For example, *Growing Communities*, based in Hackney, North London, could rightly be described as a drop scheme, box scheme, city farm, market, incubator and cooperative, as it builds facets of each of these typologies into its business model. Such typologies can therefore prove highly restrictive when advancing the practice of food justice ideals. To explore this further we surveyed the motivations of UFEs and their consumers.

Figure 2 illustrates UFE motivations in the UK and NL where there is considerable clustering around moderate agreement with many of the statements. Though it is interesting to note that, in the case of UK UFEs, the ‘desire to make profit’ factors comparatively low compared with other competing statements, including the support of food justice. This might well be explained by the prevalence of grant funding available to UK UFEs, which relieves some of the pressure upon them to ensure profitability in their business model. Conversely, the ‘desire to make a profit’ factors higher in the Dutch case. There are also differences in responses between the UK and NL with regard to ‘climate change mitigation’ and to a lesser extent ‘providing higher quality food’, ‘education/empowerment’ and ‘passion for growing’.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

[INSERT FIGURE 3]

In the UK, the UFE consumer drive ‘to be a part of the global food justice movement’ featured comparatively low (Figure 3). The motivation ‘to support my local economy’, ‘knowledge of where the food comes from’, ‘reduced food miles’, ‘because it is more sustainable’, ‘better quality of food’, and ‘reduced climate impact’ scored highly, between 59% and 89%. ‘Reduced food miles’, ‘knowledge of where my food has come from’, and ‘to support my local economy’, also score relatively highly for Dutch consumers, but only at 37%, 35% and 30%, respectively. This suggests that Dutch consumers may be more sceptical about the empirical validity of claims connecting local food to positive outcomes for the environment and to wider economic benefits.

This illustration of UFE and consumer motivations offers some insight into a socio-political context where their everyday decisions are mixed and clearly do not befit conventional classifications of “alternative” versus “mainstream” practices. Rather the alternative and mainstream dimensions of UFE practices are co-evolutionary, and its drive toward a food justice ideal would be best understood as part of an emergent set of everyday practices in a period of unresolved experimentation. On the one hand, this context draws the attention of some to a complex web of ‘tipping points’ including parallels between terms on which the UK

leaves the EU and its direct implications for food, farming, and diets (Marsden and Morgan 2017). On the other, it can be potentially suggestive of new opportunities for more just and sustainable food systems.

### **Discussion: City-regional food systems planning in a period of unresolved experimentation**

To situate planning practice in the abovementioned context is to consider how food is connected to land-use planning and non-food related objectives of city and regional policy circles from infrastructure and transport to environmental conservation, housing and economic development. The meaning of food, then, shifts from the stuff we eat to a means through which to understand more sustainable [urban] futures. However, if we consider such opportunities for transformative change, then the general consensus around integrated approaches to social justice, ecological sustainability, community health and democratic governance not only asks what it means to practice a transformative politics across the food system (Levkoe 2011), but also what it means to break out of the box toward transformative ‘radical planning’ practices for the same (Albrechts 2015). So how do we move forward the diversity of urban food enterprise practices through food justice scholarship and overcome the multiplicity of ways of practicing it?

This line of inquiry must first consider the suggested impasse in regional and food [justice] studies (Passi and Metzger 2017; Cadieux and Slocum 2014). First, we must question the juxtaposition of a communitarian politics of urban food enterprises as a negotiated product of its inter-relationships with other centres of power – driving advocates of food justice to question the purpose and practice of this ideal. Second, why the ‘region’ – what is there to be gained by foregrounding this spatial idea? Through these considerations, I will argue for a dialectical repositioning of a communitarian politics alongside questions of pragmatism and justice, which break from essentialist reading of a neoliberal order toward one of emergent and co-evolutionary political ontologies of hope. City-regional food systems planning practice has a natural home at this crossroads of differentiated state-global geopolitical transitions and ideological pragmatism on the ground, but it too needs to be re-thought.

#### *‘Dialectical utopianism’: Breaking with the essentialism in critiques of the neoliberal praxis*

In Agyeman and McEntee (2014), the authors isolate food justice organisations from other “alternatives”, claiming that “only the prerogatives of privileged populations will be realised” as long as these organisations continue in the name of food justice. The authors later concede that “FJ [food justice] organizations need to operate within neoliberal frameworks to exist” – the very same frameworks they ideologically *oppose*. (Italics added, p. 212-13). Like Cadieux and Slocum (2015), they recognise the contingent and contested reality of food justice practice. Though, the essentialist narrative put forward by Agyeman and McEntee pre-figures food justice as a radical movement that explicitly rejects a neoliberal global order associated with many aspects of the alternative food movement. Rather than embrace the “mushy middle of do good capitalism” (Johnson and Cairns 2013, p. 1), the authors advance specific political and analytical boundaries. Their constructivist ontology is predisposed to drawing a clear divide between what is *not* the corporate, capitalist ‘business as usual’.

However, the above dilemma of a mushy middle that urban food enterprises occupy between conventional and alternative practices is an experimental space that is complex, contradictory and exciting at the same time. It is a space where the idea of introducing agriculture into cities as part of wider urban strategies of regenerating ecosystem services and encouraging low carbon development, while re-positioning market economies toward fairer and more inclusive forms of capitalism, health and well-being, shifts our understanding of food as the stuff we consume to one where its multiple meanings are an expression of *many* justices. This potential for plural and contradictory agendas, when taken as the norm, questions the fundamental premises of an *idea* of justice but also foregrounds the idea of the region, and the relevance of [city] regional planning.

This view brings with it a need to reconsider an idea of justice in the processes, relations and centres of power across food systems, and its urban spatial and architectural manifestations in cities – utopias of process and form. That is, we often can be quick to discount utopian ideals – where the scalability of

“alternative” food practices can raise concerns with the commercialisation or mainstreaming of urban agriculture in cities, and wider processes of the financialisation of food retail globally. This is a concern with the vertical integration of local-global relations into new urban food enterprise practices around retail, where a new generation of ‘globalising locals’ may be pulled away from the questions of urban food sovereignty and justice. Whereas producers may be driven by local, and seasonal and organic produce, retail and catering may be seeking to supply organic and fair trade, possibly low meat and wholefood consumer demands globally.

Finally, where is the planner in all of this? When food can be easily framed within climate change and local carbon development strategies, market-oriented property-led practices can reinforce powers of vertical integration at a cost to outstanding food poverty concerns in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. In fact, this would be consistent with Donald (2008), who finds ‘it is ironic that planners are embracing these very localized, non-market programmes to feed the most marginalized in the community while at the same time offering public subsidies and supports to facilitate the rapid scaling up and consolidation of the food distribution and retail landscape in general’. (p 1255)

This is evident, for example, in the introduction of trendy food halls like *Time Out Market* in Lisbon Portugal – with its locally deculturalised cosmopolitan “place-based” ethical, organic and ‘local’ food space that doubles as an entertainment venue. The food hall is part of a wider urban regeneration strategy that brings fresh, quality food into the city by providing entry to market for aspiring urban food enterprises, but has been retrofitted and partly occupies the long-standing traditional and architecturally impressive neighbourhood food market (Figure 4). Locally known as the *Mercado da Ribeira*, its roots date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a node in global trade routes. It gradually became synonymous with fresh local produce in the twentieth century before it re-joined the global network of *Time Out* markets 2014 – a hybrid of its global and local food histories.

[INSERT FIGURE 4]

The *Time Out Market* – Lisbon is part of an urban food future in Johnson and Cairn’s (2013) ‘mushy middle’. Though, for the staunchest of food justice advocates, this up-market urban form is little more than a ‘place-based’ approach to global food tourism or the conventionalisation of an alternative urban foodscape. There is an undeniable tension, here, between the physical form and processes of urban food utopias where projects like the ‘*agritecture*’ of Despommier-inspired living skyscrapers of vertical agriculture or the agricultural urbanism of Agromere in the Netherlands collide with global food movements like Food Sovereignty and Food Justice. Though, David Harvey in *Spaces of Hope* calls for a ‘dialectical utopia’ (2000, p 177) where a dialogue can be brought to these distinct utopian ideals, transcending aspects of design, architecture and planning to engage more closely with the diversity of urban cultural practices, human behaviour and desires. In this way, the free-flowing processes of urban grassroots movements like food sovereignty, food justice and others

‘[B]ecome instantiated in structures, in institutional, social, cultural, and physical realities that acquire a relative performance, fixity, and immovability. Materialised Utopias of process cannot escape the question of closure or the encrusted accumulations of traditions, institutional inertias, and the like, which they themselves produce’ (p185)

The ‘mushy middle’ is not dystopian, but instead a space of hope, of political ontologies of possibility where:

‘[W]e simply cannot know with certainty what kind of outcomes will emerge. Both the social and the ecological orders, particularly when taken together, are open and heterogeneous to the point where their totality can never quite be grasped let alone manipulated into predictable or stable states’ (p 254)

This view is not shared among food [planning] scholars. For example, Agyeman and McEntee (2014) problematize the co-opting of food justice by the state. “...The state [USDA], they argue, “now defines what is or is not an area of inadequate food access, thereby legitimatizing the claims of some and discounting



others who do not meet the state's criteria." (Italics added, pp. 214-15) This process of "legitimizing the claims of some and discounting others" borders on relative ideas of justice. But it equally begs the question, whose issue is 'food justice' anyway? It also brings to light how we redress the co-existence of different forms of food justice practice at all levels from the local to the global – delinking 'legitimacy' from a prefigured definitive sense of what 'food justice' means and how it should be done, and again back to a reading of food justice practice that is open and embracing of difference, of a dialectical utopianism.

Cadieux and Slocum (2015) further stress the importance of clarity and rigour over the meaning of doing food justice. Food justice as a 'universal ideal', like environmental protection and human rights, moves around the world and becomes "engaged, [...] deployed for particular purposes in place rather than remaining transcendent with their definition and application captured elsewhere" (p 12). They note, and rightly so, that such application of a universal ideal, like justice, involves "many situated perspectives from which people experience, evaluate, and act upon uneven relations of power and their unequal consequences. In short, they stress that a universal notion of justice could erase this ideal's contingent and contested reality" (italics added 2015, p. 12) whereby the "transformative work of those doing food justice gets stuck" (italics in original, p. 13).

However, if the pluralism in food justice practice were taken as a 'heuristic' for the 'norm', where we suspend ethical predication based on the other "lesser" forms of food justice practice, then the essentialism in critiques of the neoliberal, of the 'conventional' or 'mainstream' in global-local food relations is ultimately decentred (James 1995). This embrace of pluralism or the diversity of urban food enterprise practices frees our conceptual language and practice of food justice, but it raises new fundamental questions surrounding what constitutes a *pragmatist ethics* in city-regional food systems planning when the act of doing food justice is consequently a function of pragmatic real-life choices for these urban food enterprises.

### **Rethinking justice in urban food systems. Some concluding thoughts**

The opportunities for UFEs relate to a mix of economic, and social, environmental and food justice motives that they selectively draw upon for embarking on their venture as an enterprise, and that motivates them throughout the process of 'doing business'. Their primary objective is not to produce profit for shareholders, but to provide products and services in a manner that is socially and ecologically sustainable; they offer an alternative to the current food system as a means to addressing wider social issues, including but not limited to food poverty, obesity, and the barriers to food access and choice over nutritious quality food and its causes. This emphasis on 'local' foods, which can engender a greater sense of transparency, accountability and the interaction between producer and consumer, led our London focus group participants to define *trust* as the unique selling proposition of local food (Nunes et al 2015, p 97-102). The project also identified particular challenges for urban and regional strategic planning in both countries. These challenges include: the creation of local jobs, with an attention to neighbourhood-level entrepreneurship and economic development, especially among economically disadvantaged urban areas; the range of unique local food initiatives that emerge from and motivate processes of community development and urban regeneration across diverse urban communities; and the creative reuse of unused spaces and buildings.

For many UFEs, their concern with a lack of economies of scale and a lack of market access only stretches so far as to ensure their commercial viability. In part, this could be causing, or at least may not be helping to ease, some of the bottlenecks encountered by many UFEs. Some of the crucial bottlenecks that this study has identified are the lack of entrepreneurial skills, the lack of access to finance, the lack of access to land, and the lack of a common marketing and sales channel. Other bottlenecks, which are less easily influenced by UFEs, include: policy barriers (regulations concerning soil pollution, food and sanitary standards, or on-site processing); increased competition from supermarkets selling 'local' products; and the urban engineering skills and knowledge necessary to reap the potential climate benefits of linking the food cycle to (waste) water, organic waste and energy streams at the city- regional level. These are all areas of where urban planning and design practice can make an impact.

Though, in light of these opportunities and barriers, moving forward food justice debates does raise fundamental questions surrounding what constitutes a *pragmatist ethics* in city-regional food systems planning. This is an area of research that needs to be further explored. In a period of unresolved experimentation and contestation in global-local food relations, a rethink of justice in city-regional food systems planning lends itself to a reconceptualization of the “political” in food justice practice where it can concern other food-related interests such as health inequalities, and climate and environmental justice.

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