

The Myths of Local Food Policy: Lessons from the Economic and Social History of the Food System

by Pierre Desrochers

For several years, activists and policymakers have promoted a wide range of local food initiatives. Many of these have been unsuccessful or have experienced significant problems. For instance, urban vertical farms went bankrupt. Backyard chickens showed up in increasing numbers in animal shelters. Participants in community-supported agriculture arrangements suffered from “supermarket withdrawal” syndrome and failed to renew their membership. Cases of fraud were uncovered at farmers’ markets. Even more problematic, intermediaries spontaneously emerged between middle- and upper-middle-class consumers and local producers of expensive niche products, a far cry from the fresher and more affordable food for all once promised by activists.

These outcomes were unavoidable because the approaches promoted by local food activists (also known as locavores) (re)created the problems that had historically motivated the development of modern agricultural production practices and of the globalized food supply chain. By promoting the increased production of local food that does not offer a compelling quality/price ratio while shunning modern pro-

duction and processing technologies, activists ensure that our food supply will become more expensive, environmentally damaging, and hazardous to our health than is presently the case. This is because their prescription is based on five myths that are debunked in this paper. In summary:

Myth #1: Locavorism nurtures social capital

The locavores’ arguments

Direct connections between final consumers and local food producers mend local community ties eroded by the anonymous character of the globalized food supply chain and large retailing operations. Knowing your farmer(s) promotes camaraderie, informal conversation, greater understanding, and good will between urban consumers and agricultural producers. This results in greater trust and collaboration among local actors and more resilient communities.

Facts

Conventional food practices generate much social capital, such as when urban teenagers get part-time jobs working in grocery stores and come into contact with the complexity of the food system and the diversity of customers. There is no evidence that locavorism nurtures the development of more or better social capital than in its absence. Another problem for the locavores’ claim is that intermediaries in the conventional food supply chain create value by delivering lower costs (by ruthlessly looking for the better deals

among several suppliers), greater convenience (through closer geographical proximity to consumers) and less waste (by providing consumers with the amount of food they need when they need it) than direct marketing approaches such as farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA). While farmers' markets and CSA might result in genuine new friendships, spending more time and money to acquire food means fewer opportunities to nurture social capital in other ways, from charitable giving to volunteering.

Much evidence also suggests that: 1) direct marketing has and will by necessity remain insignificant in terms of overall food retail; 2) traditional problems inherent to retailing activities have and will result in the emergence of intermediaries between alternative local food producers and geographically proximate consumers; 3) producers and retailers in short supply chains have fewer incentives (e.g., lack of brand reputation, not valuable enough to be worth suing) than large food producers and retailers to tell the truth about their offerings.

Myth #2: Locavorism promotes economic development

The locavores' arguments

Additional local food purchases improve the economic circumstances of mostly small-scale farmers who otherwise struggle against international competition. Money spent locally stays in the community and generates additional employment in other lines of work rather than ending up in the distant headquarters of large retail chains, shipping companies, and corporate farms.

Facts

In a market economy, retailers will always display local food that meets their specifications (e.g., volume, quality) when it offers the best quality/price ratio. Such local food creates value and jobs not because it is local, but because it is the best option available at that point. Wholesalers and retailers do not bother importing food from distant locations unless it is a superior alternative to local products. Cheaper imports leave more money in the pockets of consumers to spend on other things, thus creating more jobs overall, both locally and elsewhere. While some painful personal or regional adjustments might sometimes be required as a result of im-

ports, this process raises living standards overall, including those of agricultural workers, many of whom will be offered better employment alternatives as a result.

The high cost of land and other inputs in cities, along with inherent technical limitations, make urban agriculture in the form of urban rooftop greenhouses and especially vertical farms extremely expensive to build and operate. As such, their potential market niches are limited to expensive high-end products (herbs and leafy vegetables in the case of vertical farms) targeted at middle- and upper-middle-class consumers who share their owners' beliefs as to the unsustainable character of modern agriculture. The recent bankruptcies of many vertical farm projects suggest the model is inherently unprofitable.

Economic development has never occurred without urbanization and urbanization has long been impossible without substantial food imports from distant locations.

Myth #3: Locavorism is tastier, more nutritious, and safer

The locavores' arguments

Because locally grown food is fresher, it is tastier and more nutritious than items that have travelled long distances. Food contamination is also more likely in central processing facilities where vast quantities of food from diverse geographical origins congregate and are exposed to undesirable elements. By contrast, the small scale of local food production ensures that problems are smaller and remain localized.

Facts

Major advances in the preservation and transportation of food in the 19th century marked a major break with the more monotonous and less nutritious local diets of our ancestors. When nutrition did improve for common people, it came at the price of a growing distance between producers and consumers.

The locavore's claim that freshness is key to superior taste and nutrition is both self-defeating and mistaken. Barring massive investments in heated greenhouses, fresh food is only available for short periods of time each year in temperate climates, whereas the globalized food supply chain

delivers “permanent summertime” in the produce sections of supermarkets. Produce grown specifically for freezing and canning by large concerns is typically picked in its best state and, depending on the commodity, freezing and canning processes often preserve nutrient value better than refrigeration. For instance, canned peaches are just as nutritious as fresh ones, while canned tomatoes are more nutritious because the cooking process makes them more easily digestible. There is no simple correlation between freshness and nutritional value, but there is one between long-distance trade and the year-round availability of fresh produce.

Small farms and processing operations can never possibly assemble the same quality of equipment and food safety know-how as larger firms that can invest in sophisticated technologies and protocols to deal with the dangerous bacteria, viruses, and microbes that are all around us (e.g., salmonella, listeria, norovirus, campylobacter, E. coli O157:H7). Our modern food system is by far the safest in human history. Perceptions to the contrary are driven by the greater ease with which problems of various kinds can now be detected, acted upon, and reported in the media. Large supermarkets are also inherently safer than farmers’ markets which are, in most cases, temporary outdoor events with few facilities and whose vendors have, in general, received only the most basic training in food hygiene.

Export operations in less advanced economies established by or working in collaboration with sophisticated producers based elsewhere typically implement state-of-the-art technologies which are then implemented in the domestic market. Paradoxically, food produced by small operators and sold at local farmers’ markets in advanced economies rarely undergoes the same level of scrutiny.

Furthermore, the locavores’ fondness for re-introducing livestock in the urban environment presents significant public health risks.

Myth #4: Locavorism increases food security

The locavores’ arguments

Local producers are more dependable than foreign suppliers in times of political and economic crisis. Diversified local

agriculture is also less likely to succumb to pests and diseases than monocultures.

Facts

Famines have plagued humankind for at least 6,000 years. Many were attributable to natural factors such as unseasonable heat or cold, excessive or insufficient rainfall, floods, insect pests, rodents, pathogens, soil degradation, and epidemics that made farmers or their beasts of burden unfit for work. As the historical record clearly shows, the crop diversification strategy of subsistence agriculture communities could never overcome the fact that they were condemned to put all their production eggs in one regional basket.

What ultimately delivered most of humanity from widespread malnutrition and famine was long-distance trade and the ability of regions that were experiencing bad harvests to rely on the surplus of those that had enjoyed better than average ones. Because of global specialization and exchange, humanity currently enjoys its highest level of food security in history and perennial worries like food shortages and famines are now confined to the least developed and more conflict-prone parts of the planet.

The claim that monocultures and long-distance trade are more serious threats to food security than a regionalized alternative food network can only be sustained in the absence of broader economic development (which provides other income opportunities if local agricultural productions become problematic), long distance trade (including multiple suppliers and the movement of agricultural commodities when there is a local food shortage) and labour mobility (which makes emigration a realistic possibility when other options fail).

Myth #5: Locavorism heals the Earth

The locavore’s arguments

Locally produced foodstuffs travel shorter distances between final producers and consumers (i.e., fewer “food miles”) and therefore generate fewer greenhouse gas emissions than food shipped from more distant places. Because they must serve a broader array of needs than export-oriented monocultures, local food production systems are inherently more diverse and therefore more beneficial to the environment. Promoting local food production further

helps fight urban sprawl and promotes better environmental stewardship.

Facts

Local food activists never compare today's agricultural problems with the more serious ones (e.g., land erosion, soil depletion) of the past, nor do they explain how promoting a less efficient use of resources, and therefore greater consumption of land, water, fuels, and other inputs, will prove beneficial to the environment.

The notion of "food miles," meaning the distance between farms and final consumers, is a meaningless environmental indicator. Key problems include the fact that producing food requires much more energy than moving it around, especially when significant amounts of heating and/or cold-protection technologies, irrigation water, fertilizers and pesticides, and other inputs are required to grow things in a nearby region, but not in a more distant one. In such circumstances, reducing food miles implies a greater environmental footprint because of the use of additional inputs. The distance travelled matters less than the mode of transportation. For instance, moving foodstuffs halfway around the Earth on a container ship often has a smaller footprint per item carried than a relatively short distance ride by pick-up truck to deliver produce from an alternative farm to urban farmers' markets. While imperfect because of subsidies, quotas, and barriers to international trade, market prices nonetheless factor in most relevant environmental trade-offs because of the costs incurred through the use of additional inputs.

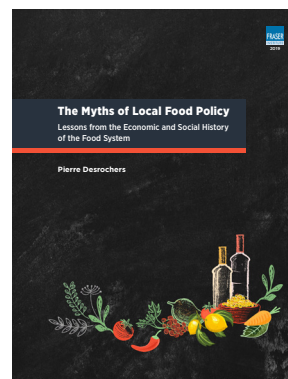
Advances in transportation and conservation technologies have also historically produced a shift from producing, storing, and consuming local foodstuffs throughout the year to the consumption of increasingly diverse and fresher products shipped from regions located at different latitudes, in the process delivering not only greater variety and quality and lower prices, but also less waste and less energy devoted to cold storage. In recent decades, the southern hemisphere, where seasons are inverted (meaning that summer months in the southern hemisphere coincide with winter months in the northern hemisphere), has played an increasingly important role in supplying northern markets when local produce is not in season, in the process further reducing waste and energy expenditure.

Fears of losing valuable agricultural land to urban sprawl are also mistaken, as the increased productivity of modern agriculture has resulted in the abandonment of much marginal agricultural land and significant reforestation and re-wilding in all advanced and most developing economies.

To the extent it takes place in a competitive setting, modern agriculture is always about getting more and better output from fewer inputs. It is puzzling that instead of clamouring for greater trade liberalization and the end of price-distorting subsidies and quotas, local food activists believe in doing the opposite.

Conclusion

What many enthusiastic local food activists ultimately fail to understand is that their vision is up against geographical advantages for the production of certain types of food; the creation of economies of scale and scope in food production, processing, transport, and safety; and the absolute necessity for economic development of coming up with an ever more sophisticated division of labour through which people are given the opportunity to acquire ever more specialized and useful skills. These realities have defeated very sophisticated local food production systems in the past and condemned their well-meaning initiatives to failure. Locavores should redirect their efforts toward promoting the greater globalization of our food supply.



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