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The devolution of urban food waste governance: Case study of food rescue in Los Angeles[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In Los Angeles (LA), food waste is at record levels. This has negative outcomes for food insecurity, land use, and methane production associated with climate change. To overcome these challenges, a range of government, private, and civil society organizations (CSOs) have developed programs to reduce food waste. With the decentralization, privatization, and devolution of food waste policies to local actors, CSOs have emerged as key institutions in the governance of food waste in many contexts. However, it is unclear whether CSOs have the capacity to reduce food waste and food insecurity, empower communities, or promote social change. To this end, this paper critically analyzes a local food rescue CSO as a case study in order to understand the challenges associated with food waste governance in LA and the roles that CSOs play in food waste reduction. Through an analysis of interview and participant observation data in LA's food system, this paper examines the ways that food waste is produced, regulated, and reused by institutions in LA. Findings illustrate that although local CSOs have expanded their food waste reduction programs, the impact of their operations may be limited. In addition, while CSOs rescue some food, they operate in conjunction with food waste surpluses and the overabundance of food, and do little to reduce the root cause of food waste or food insecurity. Although the structural causes of food waste are arguably beyond the scope of some CSOs to change, data in this paper suggest that some CSOs may contribute indirectly to neoliberal governance when they romanticize the power of local communities, depoliticize food issues, and focus on individual personal responsibility. For these reasons, this research suggests that food waste may only be reduced significantly with more government regulation of the institutions which produce food waste, namely food businesses and households.

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1. Introduction

Research on urban food systems has increased dramatically, as scholars have studied the production, distribution, acquisition and consumption of food (Del Casino, 2014; Lang, Barling, & Caraher, 2009). Urban food waste is also a critical part of food systems; yet, it has been historically neglected or misunderstood (Clope, 2013; Evans, Campbell, & Murcott, 2013; Pikner & Jauhiainen, 2014). This lack of attention continues even as recent studies have highlighted the record levels of food waste and its negative impacts on food security, environmental sustainability and

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economic viability (Bloom, 2011; Gunders, 2012; Gustavsson, Cederberg, Sonesson, van Otterdijk, & Meybeck, 2011).

While some cities have developed strong food waste policies to regulate food waste, many urban areas operate in a relatively ad hoc manner whereby the development and implementation of food waste policies are devolved to non-state actors at community, household or individual levels (Davies, 2008; Evans, 2011). This has resulted in uneven food waste, lack of accountability and inadequate data to understand the food waste crisis.

As the second largest U.S. city with a distinctly decentralized mode of governance (Soja & Scott, 1996; Wolch, Pastor, & Dreier, 2004), Los Angeles (LA) typifies many of the challenges associated with food waste governance (Bornstein, 2011). Of the 2.9 million tons of waste sent to landfills or incinerators in LA, 815,000 tons or 28% is food waste (Carpenter, 2011; Los Angeles Food Policy Council, 2013c). Although municipal, private, and non-profit actors reduce food waste in LA (Los Angeles Food Policy Council, 2013a, 2013c), civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged as critical players in the city's governance of food waste.

As part of the social economy and other ‘third sector’ enterprises (Amin, Cameron, & Hudson, 2002; Pearce, 2009), food CSOs have emerged as a way to fill basic service needs (Caraher & Cavicchi, 2014; Riches & Silvasti, 2014); develop alternative food networks (Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003); and transform the ways community food systems are governed (Goodman, DuPuis, & Goodman, 2011; Sonnino, 2014).

Yet, scholars disagree on CSOs’ impacts. Some argue that CSOs increase food access or food justice (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Wekerle, 2004), as CSOs are commonly driven by an alternative moral economy which guides their mission and programming. For these scholars, CSOs increase awareness about critical issues and contribute to the growth of social movements (Anheier, 2004; Burggraave, 2015). Alternatively, others suggest that CSOs meet needs that the state or private sector fails to address (Lambie-Mumford & Jarvis, 2012; Salamon, 2012). However, some scholars suggest that CSOs need to be analyzed more critically before they can be embraced. Importantly, researchers have suggested that CSOs idealize the local scale (Born & Purcell, 2006; Feagan, 2007); reproduce racialized processes of inequality (Guthman, 2012; Slocum, 2007); and become co-opted by neoliberal forces they aim to overcome (Busa & Garder, 2014; Guthman, 2008b; Shannon, 2014). For these reasons, CSOs have been faced with increased scrutiny, as scholars aim to understand how CSOs function within contemporary capitalism (Harris, 2009; Wilson, 2012).

To this end, this paper critically analyzes Food Forward (FF) as a case study in order to understand the challenges of food waste governance in LA and the roles that CSOs play in food waste reduction. While FF does not reflect the experiences of all food rescue CSOs, its increasingly prominent role helps to situate and clarify the broader role of CSOs in food waste reduction in LA. In particular, two research questions drive this study. First, what role does FF play in the production, regulation and reuse of food waste in LA? Second, what do these findings suggest for the viability of local food waste initiatives and their impacts on environmental sustainability and social justice? To answer these research questions, this study utilizes interview and participant observation data of key stakeholders in LA’s food system.

In short, data in this paper suggest that the decentralization, privatization and devolution of food waste governance to local institutions may not effectively reduce food waste. While CSOs like FF publicize food waste, collaborate with organizations across sectors, and increase individual engagement in moral economies which rescue food, findings suggest that the impact of FF may be small. Although 25,000 tons (California Association of Food Banks, 2014; Los Angeles Food Policy Council, 2013c) is salvaged by food rescue CSOs per year, this represents only 3% of LA’s food waste, with only 150–200 tons (Food Forward, 2014b) saved by FF per year. In addition, while CSOs rescue some food, they operate in conjunction with food surpluses and the overabundance of food and do little to reduce the root cause of food waste or food insecurity. Although structural causes of food waste may be beyond the scope of FF to change, data suggest that food CSOs like FF may contribute indirectly to neoliberal governance models when they romanticize the power of local communities, focus on individual responsibility and depoliticize food issues.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After conceptualizing the governance of urban waste and delineating the methods used, this paper critically analyzes the range of institutions involved in the production, regulation and reuse of food waste in LA, with particular attention to food waste governance in LA. Then, through the FF case study, this paper critically analyzes the challenges associated with the devolution of food waste governance to food rescue CSOs.

2. The governance of urban food waste

2.1. The social economy and the emergence of food CSOs

As noted by researchers analyzing the social economy (Amin et al., 2002; Anheier & Salamon, 1999), CSOs have emerged as key institutions in the ‘third economy.’ Noted for their flexible structure, attentiveness to local communities and non-governmental funding, CSOs include the range of advocacy, service and social movement organizations which operate in communities across the globe (Pearce, 2009; Salamon, Sokolowski, & List, 2003). These scholars argue that CSOs are driven by a moral economy which not only guides their mission and programming but also drives citizens to confront critical issues in their communities (Anheier, 2004; Burggraave, 2015). Importantly, CSOs have emerged as key recipients of welfare state restructuring, as neocorporatist or neocommunitarian strategies have promoted the devolution, privatization, and decentralization to local actors (Jessop, 2002, 2007). While CSOs could theoretically be well-positioned in the contemporary social economy which promotes the use of multi-scalar and multi-sectoral collaborations, CSOs have faced many challenges (Fyfe, 2005; Milligan & Conradson, 2006).

To start, as noted by Smith (2012) and Warshawsky (2014), it is not clear that CSOs have the capacity to transform society, as they struggle with uneven access to resources, mandates from donors, and increased demand due to persistent poverty (Bebbington, Hickey, & Mitlin, 2008; Milligan & Conradson, 2006). Although some CSOs have promoted private fundraising, membership fees, or corporate partnerships to offset losses, some scholars have suggested that CSOs’ commercialization has privileged stability over mission (Grønberg & Salamon, 2012; Young, Salamon, & Grinsfelder, 2012). Also, as noted by Elwood (2004) and North (2003), neoliberal governance regimes have transformed the ways people relate to the state, as neoliberal modes of governmentality pressure CSOs and residents to conform to market rationalities and accept harsh state policy shifts.

While food CSOs have emerged as a way to reduce food insecurity, empower communities and promote social change (Goodman et al., 2011; Sonnino, 2014), scholars disagree on CSOs’ impacts. On the one hand, some argue that CSOs increase food access and food justice (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Pothukuchi, 2004; Wekerle, 2004), as CSOs fill service gaps or are motivated by an alternative moral economy which guides their mission, internal logic and long-term goals.

Conversely, other scholars suggest that more critical analysis of CSOs is needed before their roles and impacts can be embraced. Most notably, some scholars suggest that CSOs falsely idealize the local scale (Born & Purcell, 2006; Feagan, 2007) and reinforce an unequal and uneven neoliberalism (Busa & Garder, 2014; Guthman, 2008b; Shannon, 2014). In addition, others have critiqued the atomization and racialization of CSOs (Reynolds, 2015; Slocum, 2007, 2008); legitimization of welfare state restructuring and romanticization of philanthropy (Poppendieck, 1998, 2014; Riches, 2002); difficulties of building sustainable food systems (Esnouf, Russel, & Bricas, 2013); and the challenges of creating viable food justice movements (Agyeman & McEntee, 2014; Heynen, Kurtz, & Trauger, 2012; Miewald & McCann, 2014). In all, while food CSOs are numerous, it remains unclear whether they can improve food access and food justice.

2.2. The Political Ecology of Urban Food Waste

Although research on food systems has increased recently, food waste tends to be neglected or misunderstood (Cloke, 2013; Evans et al., 2013; Pikner & Jauhiainen, 2014). This continues even as a

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