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Transition Belsize Veg Bag scheme: The role of ICTs in enabling new voices and community alliances around local food production and consumption



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores an unusual community-supported agriculture pilot project in London, concentrating on the contribution of ICTs in its development and impact. The paper contextualises the project within wider waves of local food activism and reflects on the relevance of using ICTs to increase awareness and community participation in the production and consumption of locally-grown food. The results are also analysed in light of the author's parallel research on the use of ICT for agricultural development, or "e-agriculture", in Kenya. The paper contributes to ongoing debates on ICTs and agricultural development, by highlighting community-building and the emergence of new voices and conversations as key roles played by ICTs, contributing to the development of more participatory, resilient and locally-centred food systems. The results of the pilot however also acknowledge the essential role played by activities in real life in building communal food growing practices, which can be enhanced but not substituted by online communities.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores an unusual community-supported agriculture pilot project, concentrating on the contribution of ICTs in its development and impact. The initiative was a partnership between a group of residents of the North-West London neighbourhood of Belsize Park and South Farm, an organic farm outside Royston, 45 miles north of London. It involved an opportunity for community members to learn about food growing at the farm in exchange for directly buying and distributing some of the food grown among its members. The paper contextualises the project within wider waves of local food activism and reflects on the relevance of using ICTs to increase awareness and community participation in the production and consumption of locally-grown food. The results are also analysed in light of the author's parallel research on the use of ICT for agriculture development, or "e-agriculture", in Kenya. The paper contributes to ongoing debates on ICTs and agricultural development, by highlighting community-building and the emergence of new voices and conversations as key roles played by ICTs contributing to the development of more participatory, resilient and locally-centred food systems.

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2. Context: local food activism and the Transition Town model

The growth of urban population worldwide as well as wide concerns about the sources of our food supply and an increased focus on the “local” dimension of agricultural sustainability are at the heart of the recent intensification of urban food activism projects (Garnett, 2000). Large urban hubs such as New York, Toronto and London are typical examples of a trend extends globally, equally observed in the proud promotion of locally-grown organic crops in shops and restaurants in Nairobi’s business district. Food multi-dimensionality is crucial within this trend: while movements such as Slow Food have been gaining momentum since the early 1990s, they have only reached global momentum when re-connecting issues related to the taste of food, typically of interest for a subset of consumers, with challenges faced by independent small-scale farmers and the wider environmental implications of global agribusiness. The wide alliances of food campaigners that have emerged as a result bring together environmental activists, globalisation critics and new gastronomers alike.

The “local” in food activism has been criticised for being a “trap”, a false shortcut and easy payoff hiding more profound issues of scale in food production (Born & Purcell, 2006). However, it still holds an authentic meaning in attempting to resolve the tragic disconnect between production and consumption of food (Kimbrell, 2002). This involves the reconnection of citizens with the physical space of food production (Feagan, 2007), making sense of what local can practically mean to them in their community. The mainstream success of local, alternative food sources (Goodman, DuPuis, & Goodman, 2011) has not only meant the multiplication of farmers’ markets, the development of new community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes and the up-taking of community-managed public growing plots in metropolitan public spaces, but also the development of vegetable box schemes.

2.1. The Transition Town model

The Transition Towns Movement is a more recent and holistic manifestation of this movement: initially a cluster of initiatives in the UK, it has over time expanded considerably across the world (Smith, 2011). Informed and inspired by peak oil and climate change studies, the movement focuses on the creation (and re-creation) of local communities, placing them at the front of a constructive, active response to the threats of climate change. Food growing and gardening are key pillars in the Transition Towns literature (Hopkins, 2011; Rowell, 2010), bringing communities together by engaging residents with easy, low-barrier activities. Originally started as a movement for rebuilding community in small towns, the development of a Transition Town in metropolitan areas presents new challenges: for instance, to focus on the resilience of a single neighbourhood in a city the size of London might be seen as a provocation, given the different meaning that “local” assumes in this context. At the same time, this “hyper-local” focus is a direct response to the challenges of the global city and the new meaning of neighbourhoods for civic and political action – not a new concept in its own (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001; Whitehead, 2003), but translated into new pragmatic practice by the Transition Town groups.

2.2. Vegetable box schemes and the Transition Belsize Veg Bag

Vegetable box schemes, such as the one featured in this article, are by now quite common in the growing movement of food cooperatives in the UK: the charity Sustain lists 205 collection points for veg box schemes across the country (<http://www.sustainweb.org/foodcoops/finder/>). While small-scale initiatives tend to aggregate and distribute food from a limited number of local sources, larger commercial entities, including companies such as Abel and Cole (<http://www.abelandcole.co.uk/>) and Riverford Organics (<http://www.riverford.co.uk/>), loosely reinterpret ‘localness’ and seasonality, often including things like oranges from Southern Spain, fair-trade grapes from South Africa and produce from affiliated farms in France, Northern England and elsewhere.

Partly in response to this trend, members of Transition Belsize in North-West London took interest in designing and piloting one such scheme with a strong focus on community ownership and local seasonality. Key to the initiative were experimenting with a new way of relating to a single food producer: South Farm and particularly their main farmer, Joris Gunawardena – commonly known as Bart – who approached the community with an interest in developing a collaborative, mutually beneficial relationship. The group agreed to test a partnership for an entire season, including frequent visits to volunteer at the farm, learning new skills through direct participation in farm activities, and signing-up for weekly deliveries of whatever was in season for four months, July to October, exploring the true limits of the growing cycle in a specific place. The type of partnership and project create a strong definition of local, linked to the direct, personal connection between a producer and the consumers, in opposition to the growing category of localist food (Brunori, 2007), characterised by locally-grown food, produced by unknown, indistinct “local” producers.

3. Methodology

I am a member of Transition Belsize’s coordinating group. In the context of this project, I facilitated its collective design and contributed to its practical coordination. When analysing the project for this paper, I concentrated on its role in support of community-based knowledge-sharing, to track its contribution to changing perspectives in local food production, procurement and consumption.

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