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Grassroots social innovations and food localisation: An investigation of the Local Food programme in England

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to orientate research on local food networks more firmly towards ideas of grassroots and social niche innovations. Drawing on recent conceptual ideas from strategic niche management, this paper provides an exploratory analysis of attempts to spread grassroots social innovations through the Big Lottery Local Food programme run by the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts in England. This £59.8 million programme aims to distribute grants to a variety of food-related projects and to make locally grown food more accessible and affordable to local communities. Insights into 29 funded projects, of varying length and scale of operation, are provided through over 150 telephone and personal interviews. While the Local Food programme is undoubtedly about bringing small, often neglected pieces of land into production and increasing access to affordable food, results show that the programme is also very much seen as a vehicle for building community capacity through facilitating community cohesion, healthy eating, educational enhancement and integrating disadvantaged groups into mainstream society and economy. The paper concludes with some reflections on the extent to which the concept of grassroots social innovations, as a form of niche innovation, can help understand the ability of local food networks to develop the capacity of communities to respond to locally identified problems and to effect more widespread, sustainable change.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to orientate research on local food networks (LFNs) (Allen et al., 2003; Feagan, 2007) more firmly towards ideas of grassroots and social niche innovations (Adams and Hess, 2008; Seyfang and Smith, 2007) – links which are now starting to emerge from the literature. Goodman et al. (2012, p. 66), for instance, conceptualise alternative food networks (AFNs), of which LFNs form a substantial part (Kneafsey et al., 2008; Tregear, 2011), as "a form of niche development" (see also Marsden, 2013). Within a UK context, heightened concern about food security, climate change impacts and land use challenges has put pressure on the established (mainstream) industrial food system and its adaptive capacity (Horlings and Marsden, 2011, p. 442). However, the potential of LFNs as innovative niches to address these concerns has been accorded a relatively subsidiary role in policy debates, where resilience is seen as being assured through a reliance on neoliberal economics and global food markets, with an over-riding emphasis on ensuring that there is a sufficient quantity of food available per person at a national level (Kirwan and Maye, 2013).

While clearly important, this risks obfuscating social disadvantage at smaller scales, including a failure to address food justice and food rights issues at the micro-level of individuals and communities (Dowler and O'Connor, 2011; MacMillan and Dowler, 2012). MacMillan and Dowler (2012, p. 197) caution that "national per capita availability is not a proxy for household food security" and that it fails to ensure those on lower incomes have access to healthy food. A simplistic focus on financial affordability and physical access also fails to recognise cultural needs and the importance of "social agency which comes with employment and community security"; such aspects give those involved the confidence to make dietary choices that are recognised as being healthy (such as eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day). From this perspective, resilience needs to be understood as being enabled by processes of social learning, empowerment, local democracy, social inclusion and the development of skills and knowledge at both an individual and community level (Bellows and Hamm, 2001; Dowler et al., 2001).

This paper argues that the mainstream perspective outlined above fails to acknowledge or value LFNs' social contributions, which can be significant. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to utilise a particular branch of the transitions literature, namely

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strategic niche management (SNM), as a means of giving 'voice' to LFNs, which it does though its exploratory analysis of the UK National Lottery funded (http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/), Local Food (LF) programme (http://www.localfoodgrants.org/). SNM is concerned with the management of innovative niches that have the potential to bring about sustainable change (especially socially desirable change), but which need some form of protection (from mainstream competition) or support in order to develop (Schot and Geels, 2008). More specifically, the paper draws on Seyfang and Smith's (2007) concept of community-led 'grassroots innovations' as a particular form of niche innovation that focuses mainly on the development of social innovations at the community level (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). Taking this more community-orientated perspective facilitates recognition of the need to develop the capacity of communities, in order to respond to issues that often appear to be out of their control (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section explores the concept of grassroots social innovations and its relevance to understanding how local food systems can develop their capacity to act as a vehicle for community cohesion, healthy eating, educational enhancement and integrating disadvantaged groups into mainstream society and economy. Section 3 sets out the methodology utilised for the research, before section four presents the results of the analysis. The final section then discusses the extent to which the concept of grassroots social innovations can help evaluate the impact of local food networks as a form of niche development, specifically within the context of the LF programme.

2. Conceptualising grassroots social innovations

Innovations, in general, are still largely thought of in terms of economic innovations and, in particular, technical efficiency and the "commercialisation of science and technology" that is subsequently disseminated from the top down (Adams and Hess, 2008, p. 5; Neumeier, 2012). However, over the last 20 years or so there has been a growing interest in innovations that are not necessarily technical or top-down in nature, but instead emerge from the bottom up as a means of helping to ensure more environmentally and socially sustainable systems of food provision (Klerkx et al., 2010).

In asking what is the substantive distinction between social and technical innovations, Howaldt and Schwarz (2010, p. 21) argue that in the case of social innovations "the innovation does not occur in the medium of technical artefact but at the level of social practice". In this sense, it is concerned with the delivery of sustainable social benefits through the development of new forms of collaborative action; furthermore, these benefits may well be immaterial or intangible. Indeed, Neumeier, 2012, p. 55) argues that social innovation, rather than resulting in tangible improvements, is concerned with a "change of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions". He goes on to suggest that this is why social innovations are relatively more difficult to identify than economic or technical innovations. Key to the evolution of new social relationships and structures is the role of collective action, with interaction being at the centre of any social innovation (Woolthuis et al., 2005). The incentive or necessity to change behavioural patterns does not tend to happen in the absence of some kind of stimulus, whereby social innovation (in common with economic or technological innovation) is always triggered by some kind of impetus that may either be internal to the networks of the actors involved or the result of external pressures (Neumeier, 2012, p. 63).

Social innovations are effectively "acts of change" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 51), including changes of attitude, that result in new societal practices and forms of organisation, which in turn can help to improve the living conditions of those people involved. According to Moulaert et al. (2005, p. 1976), there are three key dimensions to social innovation. The first involves the "satisfaction of human needs that are not currently satisfied", with a focus on actual content or products. The second is concerned with 'process' and changes to the dynamics of social relations, with the specific aim of increasing the levels of participation, especially amongst those who had previously been excluded in some way. Thirdly, social innovations can empower those involved through increasing their "socio-political capability and access to resources". In other words, social innovation is very much about social inclusion as well as social justice. Neumeier (2012, p. 53) concludes from this that social innovations are "new forms of civic involvement, participation and democratisation... contributing to an empowerment of disadvantaged groups and leading to better citizen involvement which may, in turn, lead to a satisfaction of hitherto unsatisfied human needs". Nevertheless, Howaldt and Schwarz 2010, p. 21) urge caution in suggesting that just because something is 'new' does not mean that necessarily it is 'good', simply that it is seen to be "socially desirable", at least in a normative sense. As such, it is necessary to conduct empirical research on the outcomes of social innovation, in order to establish the extent to which it has enabled positive 'acts of change' for the community(ies) involved.

Adams and Hess (2008, p. 3) identify two further key aspects of social innovation, which they feel have the potential to change the way in which public interventions address social issues at a locally-specific level. These include a focus on "asset building rather than need", together with a recognition that the community itself should be viewed as being a social agent with the capacity to engender change. The former, they argue, in building the asset base and capacity of those involved, can help prevent the problems being faced by individuals and communities developing into a crisis. The latter, in emphasising the significance of place and location, can enable the development of cross-sectoral activity and break out of the silo mentality so often associated with top-down governmental programmes.

Seyfang and Smith (2007, p. 585) introduce the term 'grassroots innovations' to describe "networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions" – in their case, within the context of sustainable development. These innovations, they argue, differ from top-down solutions in that they involve people at the community level "experimenting with social innovations" and developing innovative niche-based approaches for the betterment of the locality in which they live. Further, the focus of these initiatives is on developing social structures and the capacity to build resilience at a community level. They are driven by two key goals: firstly, to satisfy the needs of those people or communities who may in some way be disadvantaged by or excluded from the mainstream market economy, through helping to develop their capacities; and secondly, by an ideological commitment to develop alternatives to the mainstream hegemonic regime, which includes re-ordering the values and indicators of success for initiatives. As such, they are operating according to a different set of metrics from the mainstream, focusing on social and cultural change rather than simply economic growth. Seyfang and Smith (2007) identify that grassroots innovations have two main types of benefit. Firstly, there are 'intrinsic' benefits, which involve demonstrable benefits at a community level, such as generating job opportunities, developing the skills base or helping to engender self-esteem and confidence amongst those involved. In this case, there is no specific intention to challenge the dominant regime; rather the focus is on local-level improvements that develop as a result of putting local-level skills into action in order to address local level issues. Secondly, 'diffusion' benefits are more ideological in scope, intent on leading to transformations of the dominant, market-based, technology-driven regime beyond the