



Repoliticising and scaling-up ethical consumption: Lessons from public procurement for school meals in Brazil



Dorothea Kleine^{a,*}, Maria das Graças Brightwell^{b,1}

^a Royal Holloway, University of London, United Kingdom

^b Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Ethical consumption is a vibrant field of research but suffers from both empirical and conceptual biases. Empirically, too much of the data is gathered in the global North, often framing a false binary in which consumption spaces are located in the global North while production takes place in the global South. Conceptually, there is a growing demand for researchers to move away from an emphasis on the individual consumer and instead focus on collective agency and structural change. This paper offers contributions to both of these frontiers of research. It reports on data on ethical consumption and public procurement, collected through the first ever large scale representative survey on procurement criteria and 16 focus groups in Brazil. It concretises these debates by focusing specifically on the pioneering Brazilian school meals policy which supports both “family farms” and organic modes of production at a massive scale, in providing meals to 43 million Brazilian children. Lessons learnt from the study include, firstly, the potential for successfully scaling up ethical consumption through public procurement; secondly, the way in which such scaling-up forces the public debate to engage with food production and consumption at a systemic level; and thirdly, how the systems-level debate leads to a repoliticisation of the discussion of the cultural, social, economic and environmental role of food and farming. The focus group discussions showed a high degree of support for the school meals policy, including from affluent citizens whose children would not benefit from the scheme. Surveys also showed strong support from Brazilian citizens for using environmental and social criteria in public procurement.

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1. Introduction

For too long, ethical consumption research has perpetuated a binary division, in which producer-related research is conducted in the global South and consumer-related research is conducted in the global North. Cotte and Trudel's review (2009) claimed that 90% of studies in the area of ethical consumption relate to North American or European consumers, and ethical consumption research published in English is characterised by an overrepresentation of the US and UK. Thus this special issue is a welcome departure from the common trend, highlighting instead consumption contexts in the global South.

This paper contributes to the debate by addressing two research frontiers in ethical consumption research. Firstly, by focusing on data from Brazil, it adds to the growing body of literature which addresses ethical consumption in the global South, in this case

from a large middle-income country with high social inequality. Secondly, it supports calls in ethical consumption literature to move away from a focus on isolated consumption decisions by individuals to also examine mechanisms of collective and scaled-up decision-making. Such mechanisms, we argue, may hold powerful potential for more structural change. We examine sustainable public procurement and in particular the Brazilian school meals sourcing policy, as an example of such scaled-up decision-making. With, to our knowledge, the first large-scale representative survey and in-depth focus group research, we examine the public's view on “ethical” criteria in public procurement.

The Choices Project brought together academic researchers from Brazil, Chile and the UK, as well as three ethical consumption NGOs from the respective countries.² It is worth noting the differences in

* Corresponding author at: Dept of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham TW20 0EX, United Kingdom.

E-mail address: Dorothea.Kleine@rhul.ac.uk (D. Kleine).

¹ With Roberto Bartholo, Rita Afonso, Dalberto Adulis, Tomás Ariztía, Nurjk Agloni, and José-Manuel Melero.

² These were, in Chile, Tomás Ariztía and Nurjk Agloni from the Universidad Diego Portales, and José-Manuel Melero from the NGO Ciudadano Responsable; from Brazil, Roberto Bartholo and Rita Afonso from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro and Helio Mattar and Dalberto Adulis from the Instituto AKATU, and from the UK, Dorothea Kleine and Maria das Graças S. L. Brightwell from Royal Holloway, University of London and Rob Harrison from the NGO Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA), publishers of Ethical Consumer Magazine.

language which existed among the project partner countries: While “ethical consumption” is a term familiar in UK academic discourse, our NGO colleagues in Chile spoke about *consumo responsable* – responsible consumption, while our Brazilian NGO partner preferred the phrase *consumo consciente* – conscious consumption. For the purpose of our academic project we agreed to make our terminology in English publications compatible with the “ethical consumption” literature. The international team jointly agreed a definition of “ethical consumption” (or its international translations) as: “consumption which takes into account aspects which go beyond economic price, such as social, environmental and wellbeing criteria. At the purchasing moment, “ethical consumption” attempts to take into account, based on available information, one or more of the following: a) the provenance of the good or service and b) the consequences of buying a good or service. We also include reduced consumption and non-consumption as a potential form of ethical consumption.”

In this paper, we focus on the findings from Brazil, a country which, prior to the recent downturn, has experienced economic growth and prosperity over the last decade, with a greater percentage of the population going to university and pursuing what might be considered middle class careers. Official documents from the Brazilian government (Grosner et al., 2012) claim that in the last decade the Brazilian “middle class” expanded from 70 million to more than 100 million Brazilians.³

Despite the rise in disposable income for the population, inequality in Brazil remains high, with a Gini index of 0.55 (World Bank, 2013a). Alongside the expansion of domestic consumption sit fears about how much of this consumption is based on credit and concerns that the new mass consumers are a particularly materialistic and status-focused group unlikely to make “ethical” shopping decisions.

Brazil, with a GDP of 2.25 trillion USD (World Bank, 2013b), is now the seventh largest economy in the world with a population of 199 million (World Bank, 2013b) and a large domestic market. Successive centre-left governments have presided over state spending which accounts for 39% of GDP in Brazil (IEF, 2013).⁴

The overall project (see www.sustainablechoices.info) asked citizens in Brazil and Chile about their views on their own individual consumption, as well as on public procurement, or the processes by which the state makes buying decisions for goods and services in the name of all citizens, using taxpayers’ money. This allowed us, in 32 focus groups and in representative surveys in each country, to explore and compare individual and collective consumption. In this paper we present findings from Brazil, focussing particularly on public procurement, and here in particular on the specific example of the new Brazilian school meals law of 2009. This policy decreed that 30% of produce for school meals should be procured from family farms through a separate bidding process (Ministério da Educação, 2009) allowing a 30% price supplement for organic produce. It is also a fascinating example of how decades of civil society activism at both the producer and consumer end have now found their way into legislation. We explored people’s view on this new law, and in doing so enquired about the success and the challenges of this policy.

In our research we sought answers to the question of how choices on consumption made by many individuals might be successfully aggregated to guide collective choice. We were looking to identify whether any lessons might be learned from a progressive Brazilian policy which we interpreted as an expression of such collective citizen choice. If the policy were successful, then the lessons

to be learned from it might help in the quest for scaling-up, and potentially repoliticising, ethical consumption in other countries.

As researchers we inadvertently carried with us an assumption about how the Brazilian school meals policy was framed. When choosing state procurement as an expression of collective choice, we implicitly assumed that citizens saw the policy makers in charge of procurement as accountable, directly or indirectly, to the citizens as voters. As the paper will show, we found little evidence of this link in people’s discourse. Instead of an understanding of a kind of voter-politician contractual politics, we instead found, in relation to public procurement and the school meals policy, a complex cultural politics of scale, intermingling with a politics of identity, expressed through food. The politics of public procurement will in each country be embedded in a specific social and political situation; however in principle key lessons should be transferable to any democratically governed country in which state representatives are asked to set the rules on buying goods and services on behalf of citizens.

Far from being apolitical, the discourses we found showed that the schools meals policy acted as a crystallisation point for different visions of what food should be produced and consumed, and correspondingly, what food systems should look like. Aspects included the relationship between price and quality, the mode (organic/conventional), the scale (large/small/“family farm”) and the origin (local, beyond local) of the food. The scale of the policy, requiring the sourcing of food for millions of children on a daily basis, meant that the debate had to be conducted at a systems level.

The Brazilian experience in constructing a public system of food and nutritional security has as its overarching principle the need to respect, protect, promote and provide the human right to adequate food. It does so by setting a number of guidelines: promotion of inter-sectoral policies; decentralisation of actions; collaboration between different government spheres; monitoring the food and nutrition situation to inform management policies; combination of immediate measures to ensure access to appropriate food with actions to foster autonomy and subsistence; linkage between budget and management; and support for research and capacity building (Leão and Maluf, 2012). It explicitly weaves together educational, cultural, social and economic objectives such as increasing consumption of healthy, safe and appropriate food that respects traditional diets and contributes to improved performance of students; ensuring universal school attendance; fostering involvement of national, regional and municipal authorities in food provision; providing incentives for the purchasing of food from family farmers, rural enterprises and traditional native communities; and enhancing the food and nutritional security of all school children, including the most vulnerable (Brazilian Government, 2009). Thus, discussing in such a holistic way entire food systems and interpreting state buying as an expression of collective choice is a clear contrast to the ethical consumption studies focusing on the buying decisions of individual consumers.

This paper offers insights at the dual research frontiers of ethical consumption in the global South and on the issue of scaling up. The analysis of findings speaks to key aspects such as scaling-up, systems thinking and re-politicisation in ethical consumption. After a literature review and explanation of the methodology, the paper will present a brief overview of the survey findings related to ethical consumption and state procurement in Brazil before moving to the specific example of the Brazilian school meals policy, focus group participants’ views on the policy, and our discussion of the findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Ethical consumption and the need for scaling up

Contemporary trends towards a politicisation of consumption have brought up many issues of justice and responsibility. As noted

³ According to government classifications, those who have a monthly per capita family income between R\$ 291 and R\$ 1090 belong to the middle class [£1 approx. R\$3.78]. According to this classification, 28% of the Brazilian population belongs to the lower class, 52% to the middle class and 20% to the upper class (Grosner et al., 2012).

⁴ For more on the institutional contexts and economic history of Brazil (and Chile), please see Ariztia et al. (2014).

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