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Changing consumption, changing tastes? Exploring consumer narratives for food secure, sustainable and healthy diets

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ABSTRACT

Mirroring trends across the Caribbean and the West Indies, the Turks and Caicos Islands are seeing an increase in the consumption of foods associated with diet-related disease and ill-health such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension and heart disease. These shifts are often attributed to the changing food preferences of consumers, as islanders are thought to be aspiring to a modern and 'Americanised' diet. Drawing on accounts derived from group and individual interviews with Turks and Caicos islanders – chiefly the women who are responsible for feeding work - this paper unpacks the notion that changing diets are a symptom of shifting tastes and preferences. Rather, narratives point to interlocking ecological, economic and social shifts that over time compound the effects of losing access to a culturally valued local source of healthy protein: fish and seafood. Taking an ecofeminist sociological perspective, this paper argues that challenges of food insecurity and diet-related ill-health share both mutual problems and pathways to common solutions.

1. Introduction

Problematizing the notion that changing diets are a symptom of shifting tastes and preferences, this paper discusses data derived from case-study research conducted across a tropical small island archipelago: the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI), West Indies. TCI is composed of 40 different islands and cays, only 8 of which are inhabited; five of which have major population centres on the islands of Providenciales, South Caicos, North Caicos, Middle Caicos and Grand Turk. While the imaginary of the Caribbean and West indies conjures images of an abundance of fresh seafood and plentiful exotic fruits and vegetables, small islands are facing growing food insecurity due to a number of interlocking factors, the most salient being environmental degradation, changing climate and the increasing reliance on imports (FAO, 2013).

Alongside this, research has noted the problem of rising obesity, and diet related ill-health associated with increasing consumption of salty and fatty foods (Sharma et al., 2008; Asfaw, 2008; Wall-Bassett et al., 2010; Goff et al., 2014, Schwiebbe et al., 2012). This rise echoes Kearney's (2010) observation that consumption patterns are changing on a global scale, particularly in parts of the world experiencing rapid transition and development through trade liberalisation and urbanisation. Concurrently, increased consumption of foods associated with diet-related ill-health is often attributed to the changing food preferences of consumers, who are thought to be aspiring to a modern and 'Americanised' diet (Tull et al., 2013). Meals comprising dried conch, pear-bush hominy and crawfish salad, thus become replaced by fried variations such as crack' conch, chicken, canned goods and synthetic products.

Lamenting the loss of diets comprising foods such as fresh seafood 'hominy', traditionally milled corn 'grits',[1] concern is often met with efforts to promote 'food literacy' by re-educating consumers as to the benefits of locally sourced foods prepared in traditional ways. This paper argues that in place of deciding which diets should be upheld or restored, researchers should explore variation in food preferences across communities, in tandem with historical analysis of the dynamics of social, political, economic and environmental changes experienced over time. The role of research is, after all, to co-create knowledge that "matters to people" (Sayer, 2011) in establishing which future food secure pathways can be identified. Such attention to the dynamics shaping food consumption is central to addressing the material, biological, cultural

[1] Grits and hominy are savoury dishes made with boiled corn meal, usually served for breakfast (akin to porridge) or mixed with seafood as part of a fuller lunch-time or evening meal.

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and social dimensions that shape the food system, if we are to take seriously the need for an 'ecological public health paradigm' (Lang and Rayner, 2012). This is no simple feat, for food often bears the signs of struggle over valued material and symbolic resources (Paddock, 2015, 2016).

Adopting an ecofeminist and sociological perspective, this seeks to connect micro, meso and macro level dynamics that shape the experience of food insecurity and diet related ill-health, as interpreted through narratives expressed in interview accounts with women across this small island archipelago. Doing so highlights the undercurrents of change that shape variations not only in their practices, but the tastes and preferences that policy discourses presume to guide the problematic consumption associated with ill-health, and are mobilised to justify succumbing to the inevitable development forces of commercialisation that undoubtedly come to undermine food security. Providing a counter-narrative, islander accounts emphasise both the tensions and potential solutions shared by food security, health and sustainability agendas.

2. Food insecurity and shifting diets

Diets across the Caribbean have been widely noted to have been increasingly formed of nutrient poor and fast-foods, which Sharma et al. (2008) suggest lead to the rise of chronic non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and cancer. Moreover, the overweight and obese make up over half of the Caribbean population where childhood obesity is also growing in prevalence (Schwiebbe et al., 2012). This predicament often results in the call for intervention via public policy initiatives that target consumers to make better, more educated choices about the foods they purchase, prepare and eat. Asfaw (2008), however, contends that a key reason for this shift towards diets comprised of foods considered poor in nutritional quality is the lack of fruits and vegetables available for consumption, with only one third of the sampled Caribbean countries understood to be able to meet the World Health Organization's recommended intake per capita. The rise of imported foods is commonly attributed to such issues of unavailability, lack of affordability and poor access to foods deemed nutritious, satisfying and culturally appropriate for consumers.

FAO STAT (2013) cite CARICOM's food import bill increasing from US$2.08 billion in 2000 to US$4.25 billion in 2011. Not only impacting foreign exchange levels, social programmes, and displacing local production, FAO suggest there is a correlation between this rise in imports and the rise of obesity and non-communicable disease observed in the region (FAO, 2015). Making a wider argument about the detrimental effects of such trends for climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies, Wilson (2016) suggests that the ways in which food and nutrition policy is grounded in corporate control of food and agriculture - Friedmann and McMichael's (1989) 'food regime' (see also McMichael, 2009) - is a core culprit in rising food insecurity among Caribbean nations. As corporate food regimes displace local agriculture through the promotion of industrial agricultural practices, not only are carbon emissions increased, but come to increase reliance on imports from the United States. In turn, powerful vested interests are invited to the table, shaping decisions about what is imported, when, and at what cost. In this way, the mounting social, ecological and economic effects of commoditization of food systems are considered highly visible in the Caribbean context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Dewey (1989) found in her study of food systems and nutrition across the Caribbean and Latin America, that the greater the independence of a family from the market economy the better off the family were in nutritional terms, particularly for those families with low cash incomes. Commoditization of food, thus has direct effects in the substitution of traditional foods with purchased food, which, in turn, influences dietary diversity, while also bringing dependency on foreign exchange. This latter effect is compounded by conditions of trade that are often unfavourable, leaving them in a position of comparative weakness in macro-economic policy terms.

In seeking to address the symptoms resulting from these issues, policy recommendations tend to err on the side of educating consumers to return to traditional, long-established modes of food preparation and eating, or for increasing the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables in place of processed foods. Schwiebbe et al. (2012) suggest - in the case of childhood obesity in Bonaire - that healthy eating habits are to be stimulated through programmes based on physical activity. Sharma et al. (2008) recommend nutritional interventions that simply replace the most common sources of fat with lower fat or lower sugar alternatives, or encourage cooking methods that replace frying with steaming, grilling and stewing. However, we might question the premise of this problem representation; that consumers have made a conscious choice to eat in such ways that exacerbate these conditions of ill-health. Moreover, projects that assess the impact of various determinants on the potential for consumers to realise more sustainable diets (for example, Johnston et al., 2014) arrive at a similar conclusion, by suggesting that what is needed is to develop new and better metrics to enhance the effectiveness of marketing strategies aimed at encouraging the consumption of sustainable foods. While effective marketing and educational campaigns may form one part of the puzzle, wider influences shaping food consumption practices must be more fully understood. However, this demands a focus wider than consumption, urging us to look instead to the myriad modes of provision that serve the contemporary diet. Research questions might guide investigations into the kinds of foods that are affordable, accessible and appropriate to consume, and how this has changed over time.

This line of thinking is expanding in food security research. Sonnino et al. (2014) argue there is a need for a more systematic approach to food security research that expands beyond a focus on production which has so far imparted explanations for issues related to availability and access but at the expense of food utilization (as similarly noted by Ericksen, 2008). Noack and Pouw (2015) have since maintained that unless we understand how food is utilised in a particular cultural or social context, we are ill-equipped to formulate effective solutions to problems of unaffordability, inaccessibility, inappropriateness and instability. Furthermore, I suggest that it is crucial to recognise how tastes and preferences are shaped, and how these are met by different food system configurations. This echoes Agarwal's (2014) argument that international development projects have suffered from lack of appreciation of communities' own vision(s) of the 'good life', which Li (2015) illustrates in her study of Lauje highland farmers and their transition into corporate agriculture on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. Here, the farmers who switched to producing mon-cropped cacao allegedly did so without pressure from state or corporate actors, and was a choice made as a result of the desire for security and for some material and social advancement. Although this did not lift these islanders from poverty, we can see that their intention might have been to exercise their right to ameliorate conditions of food insecurity and detachment from the broader society.

Further illustrating that what people want and how they eat is entangled with long trajectories of interlocking social, cultural, political and economic processes, Wilk (1999) regales an incident in Belize, where the leader of the new People's United Party, George Price – elected once Belize was granted limited powers for self-governance from British rule – attempted to create a national cuisine as a means to push forward the project of decolonization. His popularity somewhat arose from promising equal access to the