Food security framings within the UK and the integration of local food systems

James Kirwan*, Damian Maye

Countryside and Community Research Institute, Universities of Gloucestershire and the West of England, Oxstalls Campus, Oxstalls Lane, Longlevens, Gloucester GL2 9HW, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical interpretation of food security politics in the UK. It applies the notion of food security collective action frames to assess how specific action frames are maintained and contested. The interdependency between scale and framing in food security discourse is also scrutinised. It does this through an examination of "official" UK food security approaches and the place of local food systems within these debates. The paper shows how the UK government's approach to food production and food security has been underpinned by the notion of resilience, which it considers is best achieved through sustainable intensification, market liberalisation and risk management, with local food systems largely sidelined within these "official" framings. Nevertheless, collective action frames are socio-political constructs which are open to contestation; they are not static entities and are part of a mobile multi-organizational political field. The notion of incompleteness and fragility is highly pertinent to an examination of debates about the contribution that local food systems can make to food security within the UK, suggesting that the "official" interpretation of food security can be challenged to be more inclusive and to accommodate social justice imperatives. Adopting this more holistic perspective broadens UK definitions of food security beyond the quantity of food available to encompass the needs of communities, households and individuals, offering a more transformative and progressive role for local food systems, notwithstanding the significance of asymmetrical power relations.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the framing of local food systems within food security debates in the UK, noting their absence in much of the discussion up until now. Food security, which re-emerged in international discourse to frame responses to the 2007–2008 food price spikes and related anxieties about global climate change and key resource pressures (Ambler-Edwards et al., 2009; MacMillan and Dowler, 2011), is more usually connected with market-based solutions and a technological approach to a global food crisis (Beddington, 2010; Foresight, 2011; Horlings and Marsden, 2011). Such narrow interpretations of food security and the global food crisis have negative implications for the role and development of local food systems; although more holistic interpretations potentially provide significant opportunities for the latter to make an active contribution. Local food systems represent a significant part of the broader alternative food movement (see Tregear, 2011; Watts et al., 2005), to the extent that the notion of "local food" has become something of a mantra for those intent on developing alternatives

to the mainstream food supply chain, with a wide range of research undertaken on the role of local food in rural geography and cognate disciplines (e.g. Dowler et al., 2004; Holloway et al., 2007; Ilbery and Maye, 2006; Ricketts et al., 2006; Thatcher and Sharp, 2008; Weatherell et al., 2003). At a governmental level, however, the significance of local food within the UK's food supply chain has seemingly now been sidelined by a new imperative that involves ensuring food security and resilience through a reliance on global food markets.

Despite this apparent sidelining, advocates of local food argue that it will still have a part to play in emerging food security scenarios, not least because it helps retain domestic production capacity, as well as having the potential to reduce the resource footprint of food (Brown and Geldard, 2008). Nevertheless, such claims need to be set within the context of a growing body of literature that critiques the role of local food, stressing the naivety of equating spatial framings with quality, sustainability and ultimately security (e.g. Born and Purcell, 2006; Harris, 2009; Hinrichs, 2003; NEF, 2009; Weber and Matthews, 2008). It also needs to be acknowledged that one key aspect of food security is ensuring that there is a sufficient *quantity* of food available. In this respect there is no sector-level data on how much "local food" contributes to the overall quantity of food in the UK, not least because it is difficult to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1242 714127.
E-mail addresses: jkirwan@glos.ac.uk, dmaye@glos.ac.uk (J. Kirwan).

circumscribe what the "local food sector" is (Morris and Buller, 2003). There is also no single or legal definition of local food, notwithstanding that the most widely accepted definition involves food being both produced and sold within the same relatively small area, often within 30 miles (50 km) of each other (Defra, 2003; Pearson et al., 2011). A number of bodies do provide figures for the sectors they are involved with: for example, the Soil Association (a charity who is responsible for the majority of organic certification in the UK) provides an annual *Organic Market* report, which includes details of the percentage of organic produce that is sold through outlets such as farmers' markets, farm shops and box schemes (Soil Association, 2011); the National Farmers' Retail & Markets Association (FARMA) have commissioned reports on the value of sales through farmers' markets, as well as farm shops (http://www.farma.org.uk/); and the Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens website has details of the numbers of allotments, city farms, community orchards and community supported agriculture projects, etc in the UK (FCFCG, 2011). Useful though these are, it is difficult to produce an aggregate figure of the quantifiable contribution of local food to the UK food supply chain. Perhaps the best overall estimate is that provided by the market research firm, Mintel, who in September 2008 produced a report on the market size of local food in the UK. They estimated that in 2007 it was worth £4.6 billion and that it would grow to £6.2 billion by 2012 (Mintel, 2008). In the absence of any better data, this suggests that the percentage market of local food within the UK is roughly £6.2 billion out of a total food, drink and catering market of £174 billion (Defra, 2011), or 3.5%. While this figure needs to be treated with extreme care, it does at least provide a figure to work from.

Scale figures prominently in debates about both the associated benefits and emerging critique of local food, including discussions about the size and form of the sector; likewise, food security is often differentiated by scale, ranging from the food security of individuals and households up to regional, national and global food security (Jarosz, 2011; Lee, 2007; McDonald, 2010; Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). Some commentators view food security - especially at a national level - as being synonymous with self-sufficiency; indeed, the World Trade Organisation has defined food security as a 'concept which discourages opening the domestic market to foreign agricultural products on the principle that a country must be as self-sufficient as possible for its basic dietary needs' (quoted in House of Commons (2009, p. 6)). Earlier definitional work by Maxwell (1996, p. 155) suggested that thinking about food security had shifted from the global and the national to the household and the individual; yet, much of the current emphasis on food security counters this shift and is global in perspective, as noted in commentaries which explain the origins and dynamics of the global food crisis (Jarosz, 2009; Lawrence et al., 2010; McDonald, 2010; McMichael, 2009). In a reading of World Bank and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization policy texts on food security, Jarosz (2011 see also Nally, 2011) argues that scaled definitions of food security have been used to serve neoliberal ideology, which more recently includes linking individuals to global modalities of governance that emphasise the instrumentality of agricultural productivity in development strategies.

Scale can therefore be used to justify political actions and support ideological objectives on the grounds of "moral responsibility". This paper provides a critical interpretation of national food security politics in order to examine approaches to food security in the UK and the place of local food systems within them. It operationalises Mooney and Hunt's (2009) conceptualisation of food security as a consensus frame, arguing that the interdependency between scale and framing in food security discourse warrants close scrutiny. This includes considering the implications of broadening UK definitions of food security beyond the quantity of

food available to encompass the needs of communities, households and individuals in relation to issues of micro-level capacity building (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010) and social inclusion − something that has only rarely been considered in the past (Dowler et al., 2001; MacMillan and Dowler, 2011). The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces work on consensus framing and collective action frames, as a way of providing a structure within which to assess how responses to an issue like food security can lead to opposition and conflict between different people and organisations. The third section of the paper then sets out the emergence of the food security agenda within the UK, including reflecting upon how the nature of food security has changed over time, and the "official" UK response to the current global food crisis. Section 4 examines the history and development of local food systems in the UK, including critiques about their efficacy and sustainability as a means of ensuring food security. This analysis shows how local food is notable by its absence in official responses to UK food security, with local food activities rarely featuring as possible contributors to broader food security goals. The final two sections of the paper consider how local food can be repositioned within the UK's overall approach to food security in the 21st century.

2. Consensus framing and collective action frames

Frames are mechanisms by which to organise experience and guide action, wherein actions may be individual or collective (see Benford and Snow, 2000; Mann, 2009). The notion of a frame provides a conceptual tool that helps to establish a boundary within which interactions take place (Callon, 1998, p. 249), and appropriate courses of action are taken. Hajer and Laws (2006), quoted in Tomlinson (2013, p. 3), argue that frames can be used to 'explain how policy-makers structure reality to gain a handle on practical questions'. In a recent study, Mooney and Hunt (2009) postulate that food security is an "elaborate master frame", with several distinct claims to ownership and multiple meanings for different people and organisations. They employ a frame-analytic perspective and draw on Gamson's (1985) social movements work to conceptualise food security as a "consensus frame" − wherein there is overall consent to the values and objectives signified by the term − which nonetheless engenders opposition in terms of how the goals might best be achieved or actioned. In this respect, Mooney and Hunt (2009, p. 470) argue there is a 'contested ownership behind the apparent consensus on food security'.

Mooney and Hunt (2009) identify three collective action frames, which they suggest encompass food security as a master frame. These are:

- Food security associated with hunger and malnutrition;

- Food security as a component of a community's developmental whole; and

- Food security as minimising risks in industrialised agricultural production in terms of the risk of "normal accidents" and "intentional accidents" associated with agriterrorism.

The first frame (hunger and malnutrition) is the one most usually associated with the term food security, typified by three key dimensions: availability, accessibility and adequacy (see also Ericksen, 2008). The community food security framing, which gained momentum in the 1990s through a focus on local or regional supply systems that accented environmental concerns from a sustainability viewpoint, is the one most obviously applicable to