Localized food systems (LFS) are an important element of regional development, yet understanding why some regions develop strong LFS while others do not is unclear. Research from two contrasting regions, in the UK and in Italy, demonstrates the complexity of LFS, and the important role of place in determining how policy-makers understand and support LFS in these regions. Regions that are marginal to intensive agriculture are often viewed as the stronghold of LFS. This paper challenges this view through evidence of a growing number of LFS in East Yorkshire. Both case study regions share similar issues in developing LFS.

Keywords: localised food systems; sustainability; comparative regional analysis; UK; Italy

Introduction

Localized food systems (LFS), although contested and difficult to define, have multiplied over the last 15 years as producers and consumers seek alternatives from mainstream globalized food chains. A widely used definition comes from Feenstra (1997): ‘rooted in particular places, [LFS] aim to be economically viable for farmers and consumers, use ecologically sound production and distribution practices, and enhance social equity and democracy for all members of the community’ (p. 2). LFS have been described as food provisioning systems that are different, or even countercultural, to conventional food supply chains which dominate in developed countries (Tregear, 2011). Examples include farmers’ markets (Holloway & Kneafsey, 2000), farm shops, box schemes, community-supported agriculture (Holloway et al., 2007), community gardens and organic production (Holland, 2004). LFS are often based on characteristics such as direct contact between consumers and producers, increased trust, embeddedness within the region and greater proximity (Kirwan, 2004; Sage, 2003). Eriksen (2013, p. 53) suggests that local food emerges as a counterpoint to industrial agriculture.

This paper presents research from interviews with policy-makers, local food businesses and consumers in East Yorkshire, in the UK, and the Abruzzo region of Italy, and explores how local food is multidimensional and spatially contingent. Using evidence from two contrasting types of region, one so-called industrial agricultural region, the other a more marginal region, helps to probe why some regions develop strong LFS while others do not.

Local food is frequently positioned as a core element of regional rural development, a way to overcome farming crises, revive lagging rural economies and restore consumer confidence (Goodman 2004; Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003; Seyfang, 2006). Contemporaneously, in response to concerns about climate change, global population growth...
and food security, food debates are shifting. Although policy frameworks are constantly evolving, there are divergent themes: one suggests that local food and food system sustainability can be equated; another focuses on sustainable intensification (Royal Society, 2009) as a result of predictions (Diouf, 2009) that the global population will reach 9 billion by 2050. Sustainable intensification has become a core concept in the new food security landscape, and rapidly become embedded in UK policy thinking about food systems (e.g. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), 2010).

Relating to food production, regions are frequently characterized as ‘marginal’ or ‘industrial’, without considering how food production can be complex and contingent. For example, eastern England is viewed as being devoid of LFS, a homogeneous, intensive agricultural region or a ‘placeless foodscape’ (Morgan, Marsden, & Murdoch, 2006). Regions that have been marginal to the productivist agricultural regime are typically viewed as the stronghold for LFS. For example, LFS in the UK are predominantly linked to areas like Devon, Cumbria and Wales, regions which were excluded from conventional agriculture post-Second World War. Countries such as Italy and France are often viewed as favourable for LFS as a result of a perceived cultural attachment to local food (Montanari, 1994), less centralized food systems and fewer supermarkets. Such views may obscure and inhibit opportunities and developments in regions like East Yorkshire, as well as in countries like Italy, consequently creating barriers through imaginaries of what a local food region should constitute, as policy-makers promote certain regions, whilst others are ignored.

Previous research on local food has tended to ignore intensive agricultural regions that produce commodities for global markets. This paper explores how local food is multidimensional and spatially contingent, drawing on research from in-depth interviews with policy-makers, local food businesses and consumers. LFS can play an important role in regional development, but understanding the reasons why some regions develop strong LFS, while others do not, is currently unclear. Interview evidence suggests that stereotypes of places labelled as ‘conventional’ or ‘peripheral’ are problematic as this binary relationship is not simplistic, and a more nuanced picture emerges. The research concludes that policy support is essential for the success of LFS, yet how policy-makers interpret and understand local food varies by regional context, thus highlighting the contingent nature of the processes of ‘making’ and ‘doing’ policy. ‘Local food’ means different things in specific contexts.

**Contingent local food systems and regions**

East Yorkshire, in eastern England, and the Abruzzo region, in central Italy, are taken as two case study regions for investigating LFS (Figure 1). Although they are diverse in many respects, similarities include the ways in which spatial context affects the actions, and thinking, of core actors involved in local food and rural development. East Yorkshire is an intensive agricultural region embedded into global commodity networks, yet with an emerging local food sector. On the other hand, the Abruzzo region is the type of area frequently associated with strong LFS – with high levels of marginal, upland agriculture. It is also in a country with an essentialized food culture, assumed to have high levels of commitment to local food (‘prodotti tipici’) (Helstosky, 2004; Montanari, 1994). In-depth interviews with policy-makers, local food businesses and consumers explores and problematizes these issues in the case study areas.

In East Yorkshire, respondents frequently linked areas with high nature value, such as national parks, with local food. Many referred to places like the North York Moors
and Yorkshire Dales (both national parks) as places where it would be ‘easier’ to run a local food business. East Yorkshire was described as ‘flat and boring’ in contrast. One respondent thought that, in contrast to East Yorkshire, ‘it’s good to go to a farmers’ market in Devon and Cornwall’. Further, another policy-maker suggested that ‘local food has the perception of being produced in the Dales or the hills, where you can see the animals’. In contrast, the Abruzzo region has one-third of its land mass designated as protected land. Nevertheless many respondents saw the region of Tuscany (in northern Italy) as better suited to local food, predominantly as a result of being a popular tourist destination, but also a region which is firmly embedded in the national psyche – ‘non è la Toscana’ (‘well, this isn’t Tuscany’) was a common response. Sonnino (2013, p. 3) suggests that Tuscany is well known for its local food production. This suggests that both areas, despite their differences, encounter similar problems in being recognized as a local foodscape and supporting LFS.

Can industrial foodscapes accommodate LFS?

This idea of local food as being quite separate from places of intensive food production influences how policy-makers think about local food in the context of East Yorkshire, and the policies they subsequently develop. Recent attempts to stimulate an LFS have included an annual Food Festival in Beverley (the administrative centre), a Local Food Directory detailing over 100 local food businesses, employing dedicated local food workers and a Local Food Partnership, registered as a not-for-profit company promoting local food. All these actions have challenged common perceptions of industrial farming regions, as one policy-maker recounted, ‘to everybody’s astonishment it was amazing just what is made in the East Riding, and is overlooked because the image and everybody’s thought process goes straight to the North Riding’ (the historical name for North Yorkshire). Increasing the visibility of foods produced in the region has contrasted with previous perceptions; in the words of one tourism business, ‘15 years ago I
would have said “well we’re just corn barons really,” you know there wasn’t a lot of diversity’. However, for some, the image of East Yorkshire as industrial foodscape is enduring, and represents a potential barrier for developing LFS in the region. Although there is increasing diversity of local foods in places like East Yorkshire, many still associate such regions with intensive agriculture. One policy-maker emphasized this point: ‘it’s easy to see how you would promote lamb from the North Yorkshire Moors isn’t it? Promoting wheat from Holderness is […] just doesn’t work in the same way […] it’s not […] something that’s sold directly to the end consumer’ (Holderness is an area within East Yorkshire). Thus, industrial farming regions are viewed by some as agriculturally homogeneous, leaving little room for the diverse range of products that are indeed made in East Yorkshire, including goats’ cheeses, organic salads, smoked fish, as well as lamb. Policy-makers frequently linked local food with national parks, of which there are none in East Yorkshire. Despite this, the Strategy for Sustainable Food and Farming (DEFRA, 2002, p. 70) suggested that people ‘would not want to see a polarized countryside, with some areas zoned for intensive production, while others are turned over to environmental theme parks’. Yet some remain fervently wedded to ideas of distinct and separate areas, as illustrated by a policy-maker who, when asked about the potential for East Yorkshire to develop LFS further, did not see it as being relevant as ‘bog standard grains are needed to ensure a ready supply of cheap food’. These ideas of spatially separate food regions need challenging to ensure that there is space for LFS to develop in all regions.

The last decade has seen increasing interest in local food from policy-makers in the UK, yet some remain sceptical of the impact it can make. One policy-maker, who also farms, described local food as having ‘entertainment value […] if it ever got to two percent of the market I would be surprised. It’s a bit like organic, there’s a huge amount of talk about organic food […] but it’s two and a half percent of the market!’ These views can be understood in the context of large-scale and financially profitable agriculture having become embedded locally. This frames how other farming activities are understood and perceived, so that practices not fitting into this discourse of ‘proper’ farming are derided.

Contrasting evidence from the Abruzzo region

Despite the Abruzzo region’s geography being distinctly different to that of East Yorkshire, and arguably a region with an ‘attractive’ landscape, including four natural parks, many businesses and policy-makers reported similar difficulties. Many respondents stated that Tuscany represented a better, stronger LFS; popular images of Tuscany were how local food-producing regions were imagined and idealized. Interviewees suggested that although the remote and wild landscapes of the Abruzzo region offered similar potential, they were not (yet) able to compete with places like Tuscany. Italy is a varied country and respondents illustrated the difficulties they faced in Abruzzo, such as a low external profile, relative geographical remoteness and a lack of potential customers. For instance, one regional policy-maker stated that ‘no one knows where the Abruzzo region is, not even in Italy’, while a wine producer said that ‘policy makers are located far away from us, and I think they forget that there are businesses in these mountains’.

Organic agriculture (‘agricoltura biologica’) and associated low-impact systems (‘lotta integrata’) were prevalent in Abruzzo, as the mountainous parts of the region had not been suitable for industrialized agriculture. This ‘unspoilt’ aspect of agriculture was seen as strengthening local food production, for many ‘l’agricoltura industriale non
è pensabile’ (industrial agriculture would be unimaginable here). Organic production was accepted as a ‘good thing’ in Abruzzo, whereas in East Yorkshire organic food was viewed with suspicion, as being for ‘hippies’ and critical of conventional agriculture.

The Italian producers were aware of their fragile position in a remote part of Italy, which is perceived to be lesser known – not the Italy that most people imagine. Policy-makers in the region referred to an increasing distance between consumers and producers, despite the essentialized vision of Italy as a nation of committed food lovers. Paradoxically, despite lamenting the increasing distance between producers and consumers, respondents in Abruzzo actively promote their produce to people outside the region, e.g. by targeting tourists or selling to buying groups (‘gruppi di acquisto solidale’) within Italy, or international sales using technologies such as the Internet. As such, distance can be interpreted as both geographical distance and the distance created by the number of links in a food supply system.

**Conclusions**

In-depth discussions in both case study regions revealed place-specific interpretations of what local food is, and how this is discursively constructed and contingent upon local contexts. Previous conceptualizations of LFS rarely take industrial agricultural regions into account. This paper, however, shows how one such region is successfully developing local food within a context of an industrial foodscape, thus challenging common perceptions of such places. Although regions like East Yorkshire are typically associated with conventional agricultural production, it has been shown that they can stimulate LFS, thereby suggesting that global commodity production areas are neither homogeneous nor unaffected by local food developments. Similarly, regions like Abruzzo, which are generalized as having the ‘right’ conditions for successful LFS, also require support and determination to realize their potential. Despite such regions being associated with strong LFS, they do not automatically establish them, particularly as they are often sparsely populated and may be distant from consumer demand. The paper suggests that policy and policy-makers need to address the future role of such places in food production – the development of local food in both locations is something that has to be worked at. In both cases this has been achieved through policy-makers actively trying to create a local food network/culture in response to consumer demand.

Investigating LFS in contrasting geographical regions highlights how simplistic associations of marginal agricultural regions with strong LFS can conceal more complex and deep-rooted causes for success or failure. Furthermore, regions like Abruzzo share similarities with East Yorkshire in establishing and sustaining LFS, thus dispelling the myth that Italy has a universally strong food culture, and highlighting core issues shared by diverse regions in supporting LFS. This suggests that policy-makers should reconsider the ways that commodity producing areas like East Yorkshire are viewed, accordingly challenging binaries such as local versus global or marginal versus conventional agriculture. The situation is rather more heterogeneous and multiple in many regions – flexibility and diversity are necessary to accommodate wide-ranging practices in diverse regions. This paper has illustrated that industrial food spaces can co-exist with more local and artisanal food spaces, but that the dominance of conventional agriculture has influenced how such regions are viewed by policy-makers, which results in potentially skewed imagery of where local food comes from. As such, it cannot be assumed that certain regions will develop LFS while others will not – the success of LFS are not
necessarily tied to particular characteristics, but can succeed with the appropriate support and promotion.

With food security high on the political agenda, it is important to ensure that discussions incorporate diversity, and do not become polarized along the lines of sustainable intensification versus small-scale local food. These different modes of production should not be seen as exclusive and/or geographically remote from one another. Many are arguing in favour of a more sustainable food system, as an overhaul to the so-called economically efficient but socially and environmentally unsustainable conventional food system. But they have not defined this or how it might be achieved. Evolving debates surrounding the need to meet growing demands for food from a potential global population of 9 billion by 2050 may usurp the potential for alternative and quality food networks, as food multinationals, agricultural suppliers and some policy-makers adopt a discourse of food security and sustainable intensification.

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